WORLDS OF

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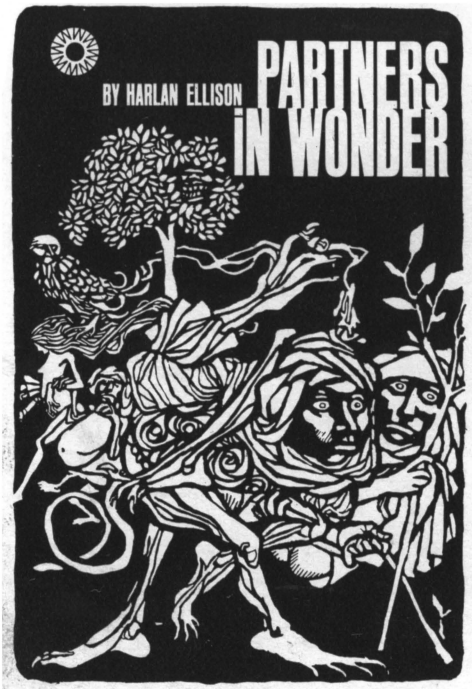

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WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

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ALL NEW STORIES

NOVELETTES

SHORT STORIES

FEATURES

Cover by GAUGHAN, suggested by TO GRAB POWER

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HUE and CRY

Readers write—and wrong!

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

May I firstly congratulate you on the quality of the "new" IF*—and secondly express you my deepest sympathy in your valiant struggle to placate that many-headed Hydra commonly known as your reading public.*

Seriously, considering the enormous variety in literary tastes, the fact that I can personally enjoy so many stories in your magazine, issue after issue, never fails to astonish me. Nor can I imagine how you do it, unless perhaps you paper the walls of your office with submitted manuscripts and thereafter at random throw darts at them. In which case, though, the laws of chance must be rather more peculiar than we suspect them to be. (As a small example of how nearly impossible your task must be, perhaps I may mention a letter by Mr. Scher in your September-October issue, where he writes of his general liking for Laumer but confesses himself "sick" of Retief. For my part, I would wholeheartedly endorse the first half of his statement, but thereafter would have to add that I enjoy the Retief Saga as much as anything Laumer has ever written. Possibly this difference of opinion may be simply due to the fact that I may be rather older than Mr. Scher, and hence at times like to lean back in my easy-chair and let myself be amused by a good-natured spoof of human foibles. This may well be somewhat cowardly, but the fact is that when the cold wind of middle-age starts blowing up your spine you do like, now and then at least, and for a short while, to forget the serious side of life.)

Incidentally, speaking of letters, the same issue of IF *also carried an impressively thoughtful communication by Mr. Carroll, considering the creation of "think-tanks" and "do-tanks," whereby people genuinely concerned about the future of our race might in a common effort strive to shape it closer to their hopes and dreams.*

I do not know whether the majority of your readers, are aware of it, but such a movement is currently getting under way, on an international basis. It is known as the PROMETHEUS PROJECT, and was initiated by Dr. Gerald Feinberg of Columbia University some 18 months ago through a book of the selfsame title. (To those of your readers who may have at least as much interest in "hard" science as in science fiction, Dr. Feinberg may be rather better known as one of today's most distinguished young American physicists, and the propounder of the hypothesis that there may indeed exist particles faster than light, the so-called "tachyons," meaning, in Greek, the "swift ones." Startling, if not downright revolutionary, as the suggestion may appear to be, it is seriously considered by theoretical physicists. See for example this year's March issue of Science: Particles that travel faster than light? *The article is by professor Roger G. Newton of Indiana University.)*

The drive behind the Prometheus Project is much along the lines of Mr. Carroll's arguments, and has been very succinctly expressed by Loren Eiseley (though he was not writing about the project at that time): "Men, unknowingly, and whether for good or ill, appear to be making their last decisions about human destiny." Commenting directly on the Prometheus Project, Frederick Pohl described it as "the only game in town."

Clearly, this is not the place to go into details, and I have taken enough of your space anyway, but may I conclude by saying that I would be personally very happy to hear from any of your readers in California, or for that matter anywhere else, who share the disturbing conviction that the time is beginning to run out for mankind.

That ours is an age of crisis is as trite an observation as one can make. The one question which remains to be answered, though, is whether our race shall prove equal to the challenge and enter a new day of virtually inconceivable triumphs—or fail and perish in the night that is falling upon all of us.

May I last express the hope that there will be enough men and women of courage and imagination sufficiently great so that the, so far, two-billion-years-long story of life on this Earth will not dismiss humanity in a mere footnote as an unsuccessful, if interesting, experiment.

Sid Krupicka
Riverside, California 92503

Dear Sir:

At "FAN FAIR II" in Toronto this August Alexei Panshin pointed out that there is no real, working definition of science fiction. He further remarked that this was due to an unreasoning desire to cling to Hugo Gernsback's definition of scientifiction. At any rate the stumbling block was the attempt to fit the concept of science into the product (how much science does Harlan Ellison have?) The most part of the speech was occupied by pointing out how impossible this definition was even in the time it was formulated—by simply reading parts from various pulps of the day.

*While there are adherents to the science of science fiction (*Dune, The Land Ironclads*) for the most part I felt Mr. Panshin was correct. To that end I evolved Vogel's Law—"Science fiction is that branch of fiction dealing with events of extremely low probability in Earth's present and/or past, with possible events in Earth's future or with events in other environments"*

Thinking it over I realized that if Damon Knight exists then someone has either beaten me to this or I am blind to its glaring faults. On either hand I would appreciate any help you could give me.

Thanks
P.H. Vogel

I would jump you on that "low probability." Probability can be low or high, depending on what the author wishes to put across. Or the author may simply use sf to tell a story that could not be told in another medium or that can best be told as sf.

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

Ballots and Bandits *by Laumer is the*

(Please turn to page 60)

TO GRAB POWER

ON THE next downtrip, while the short-winged shuttle skimmed through the man-made atmosphere high above the insta-planet's rain-filled meteoritic craters, someone fell out.

Or so it appeared on the luminescent screen in the dark stone hut—like a falling spark, falling like a shriek. The young bodyguard stared at it with surprise which plunged through horror to excitement.

Falling below the shuttle's radar-blip, the spark seemed big to be a man. It was as if his arms and legs were spread in the thickening air and he were resisting the inevitable.

"Is he conscious?" cried the old man's voice in the hut.

"Maybe if he had time to close his helmet—"

The bodyguard's boyish face became wide-eyed as he imagined himself falling toward the insta-planet. Its meteor-pocked surface would be glittering with thousands of crater-ponds like new coins. Air-drops had planted fish in them. But for some reason all of the villages still crowded around this vast polluted lake, where the little volcanic island muddied the clouds with smoke. The spark was approaching the island.

"He's falling through the air too fast, getting too hot—" the bodyguard's snub nose and broad forehead wrinkled—"unless he's in an escape bag with an ablative footcone."

From the bottom of the screen rose the volcano's image. The bodyguard's heart pounded. One of his greatest desires was to enter its smoldering crater and search for the forbidden weapons rumored to be hidden there.

HAYDEN HOWARD

The old men were fighting an ancient war—while the boy was inventing a new one!

"No parachute has opened," he breathed as the spark faded into the radar-confusing smoke, "so I guess he wasn't in an escape bag. But whatever he was in made an awful big blip on the screen." His youthful gestures were lightning-quick. "Look, now the shuttle is following its usual landing spiral back toward our end of the lake, so it couldn't have been the pilot who fell out."

Another gust of rain lashed through the crevices in the crude stone hut.

"It must have been Henrydavid," the old man moaned, leaning forward until his jagged face was silhouetted against the screen. His bodyguard looked away in embarrassment at the rough stone wall that was weeping rain.

The bodyguard fidgeted. To him the old man had long seemed a source of power. It was power too unsubstantial to be grasped.

"The world turns—" the old man murmured. "Do you think this is another attempt by those unforgiving Centralist exiles?"

"More likely an accident in the shuttle," his bodyguard said. "but you'd better go back to the village." The young man took a deep breath. "I'll paddle out to meet the shuttle."

"No," the old man said uncertainly. "No—"

WITHOUT replying, the bodyguard darted out under the smoky sunlight-edged clouds. He was uncomfortably short, but no one taunted him any more. He had wide shoulders. After his strange battle on that volcanic island, he'd been asked by the old man to be his bodyguard. And he had agreed because he was restless, born restless. He wanted to be near power. As a small boy he had dreamed of becoming so big he filled the universe with his power.

Now, as he looked up at the rainbow-arched sky, he felt tall. He imagined Henrydavid, not falling through the air but standing lithely again inside the shuttle while it clung to a synchronously orbiting freighter. Aluminum-shelled supply containers as big as caskets were being shoved in through the flexible iris that was its hatch. Henrydavid's job as customs inspector was to open them immediately.

With mixed emotions, the bodyguard frowned. These old men were still trying to prevent Centralist propaganda from reaching the instaplanet via the shuttle. But certain young men here . . .

"We'll both go out to meet it," the old man said, lifting the other end of the heavy greenish canoe.

The bodyguard had shaped it by hand-pressing layers of filamentous algae over the hull of an earlier canoe. When it had firmed, he had smeared it with fish oil and dutifully baked it in the sunlight.

Then he had cheated a little and also baked it in his village's hydrogen fusion-powered electric oven.

The wooden paddles were imported from Earth. While the crude canoe sloshed out on the immense lake the water became lively with raindrops and minnows. He had been taught that the lake and the countless crater-ponds had been filled by the Great Rain ten years before he was born here. Before that the supersaturated air for this instaplanet had been produced by remolecularizing the rocks from both poles. After the air became sweet and the rains diminished, the planet had been planted with life. The old man and his followers were delivered to it as an experiment. Economic or philosophic? The bodyguard wondered what kind of world it would become.

Now the greenish lake was swirling with great fish devouring each other in richly putrefying jungles of algae. But the land had remained barren rock, as clean and simple as the Decentralist ideal.

In the bow of the canoe the old man's slender back and arms moved his paddle with quiet grace. In the stern the young bodyguard paddled with driving force and steered as the huge shuttle taxied toward them, pushing a mustache of foam.

For the bodyguard the shuttle carried the exciting power of Earth, where he wanted to go. Its heat-stained hull contained beautiful steel tools, bright mirrors, colorful beads. He had heard fabulous tales of Earth weapons with wonderful thunder-and-lightning power which could be held in a boy's hand. He had decided the shuttle to the freighters was the one contact with Earth which must never be broken, no matter what the old man preached.

"Now it's killed someone," the old man blurted as the shuttle's scarred hull surged threateningly close to the canoe.

But his bodyguard smiled with excitement. The shuttle contained power that could be grasped. Already concealed in his kirtle of woven algae was his most wonderful possession, a steel dagger smuggled from Earth. If the old man had known he would have told him to throw it overboard, because it was a *weapon*, as was any knife more than three inches long.

The old man would have said, "Weapons lead to uncontrollable power, to Centralism. Beware."

The bodyguard scowled at the straight old back as the canoe drifted alongside the shuttle. Respectful people in the villages still addressed the old man as Mr. Decentralist and some had shortened this to Mr. Decent. But restless young men laughed bitterly. It was their fathers who had brought Decentralism to this instaplanet. The young men paced the barren rocks and looked out at the vol-

canic island, remembering Big Village before its fall. They stared at the forbidden island, dreaming of another central city, and cursed the old man behind his back.

THE bodyguard laid down his paddle and picked up his trident fish spear. His clumsy algal canoe bumped the marvelously complex shuttle. Without its usual hiss of equalizing air pressure, the shuttle's hatch opened like a camera-eye. Its inner iris looked rubbery.

The pilot's oddly blank face protruded.

"It wasn't my fault." The shiny arm of his metalized suit flew up. "Your customs inspector was blown out like that! The valve popped off our emergency air tank and air pressure did the rest. I always said that valve was dangerous. It was poorly designed."

Or sabotaged, the bodyguard thought as he scrambled into the shuttle. This downtrip there seemed to be no unannounced passengers. He eyed the rows of long aluminum supply containers, which they received from Earth in exchange for their little bottles of fish-gland extracts. Whenever he had entered the shuttle, it had had this fishy smell.

"So the air pressure shot up in here," the pilot kept explaining.

His jowls quivered and the young bodyguard remembered Mr. Decentralist's warning that such stocky or obese men were apt to be unfaithful to Decentralist ideals. It was true that the most dedicated Decentralists, who lived with austerity and simplicity, had naturally narrow physiques like Mr. Decent's. The bodyguard's wide-cheeked face grimaced, then scowled again. He didn't trust the pilot.

The pilot blustered: "I always said this loading iris is too flexible. All that pressure bulged it out, blew him out."

"Did Henrydavid have time," Mr. Decentralist murmured hopelessly, "to close his helmet visor?"

"Don't know. I had to hang on to the control panel." The pilot shifted his gaze from the old man's jagged face to the bodyguard's blunt expression of disbelief.

"Why," the bodyguard challenged, "weren't any of these containers blown out with him?"

"Because he'd already inspected them and strapped them down again," the pilot answered, "for landing as usual. Anyway, they're too streamlined to be sucked out."

The bodyguard felt outsmarted. He quibbled. "This one isn't strapped tight."

He knew the customs inspector had been a conscientious man who would have tightened the strap if he'd had time. He deliberately pointed his fish spear, which was defined as a tool, not a weapon, toward the pilot's abdomen. "Did

Henrydavid have time to open all the containers?"

"Yes, he always does—open them," the pilot blurted and looked to Mr. Decent. "I feel bad about this."

"I think we'd better inspect them again," the bodyguard said.

"Not now," replied Mr. Decent. "We've got to search for Henrydavid."

The bodyguard blinked with surprise.

The pilot also stared at Mr. Decent.

"We wouldn't be able to find anything," the pilot explained. "The shuttle was moving so fast when he was blown out, his descent speed was so great that his body was burned in the atmosphere."

The bodyguard looked at the emergency rack's twelve cubicles where the glittering, heat-reflective escape bags lay. Their "feet" were ablative cones for casting off flame as they penetrated the atmosphere. Their "heads" were two-stage parachutes. All twelve were still in the rack. No bags were missing. The bodyguard scowled, feeling baffled.

"He wasn't falling that fast," he argued. "In his safety suit like yours his body wouldn't—burn—very much."

"You don't understand anything," the pilot retorted, "about atmospheric entry speed. It would have burned him—to a crisp."

"You're the expert," Mr. Decent murmured to the pilot, "but I know we must recover his body."

"It was burned to ashes," the pilot insisted and added too gently: "He often said he'd want to go this way, with his ashes scattered over the lake he loved so well. There's no use searching for his ashes. He would have wanted it this way."

ENOUGH lies, the bodyguard thought, now convinced that the shuttle's speed had been reduced by the time Henrydavid was "blown out." The body couldn't have burned to ashes. But he didn't want to look for it either. He wondered if this "accident" were a decoy or a trap.

But he was so angry he said, "I know his suit will have preserved most of his body. We should start searching near the island."

"Near Big Village?" the pilot protested. "For his ashes?"

"Yes, in the water around the volcano," the bodyguard replied, observing the pilot's unhappy face. "Did you know we were watching the radar screen when it happened?"

The pilot glanced at Mr. Decent. "It would be too dangerous for you—for anyone—to go over there in a canoe."

"Too slow," the old man said enigmatically. And then his voice broke: "Henrydavid may be alive—floating—drowning—"

"He means rush us over there in this shuttle," the bodyguard said.

The pilot began to protest: "Using a space shuttle like a canoe—"

The bodyguard snorted. "That's what we've always used it for when no freighters have been in orbit. Push the REFUEL button."

Gurgling, the shuttle refilled its water tanks. It was frequently employed to distribute supplies to other villages along the lake shore.

"Now pull the FUSION lever only to the first mark." The bodyguard had ridden in the craft several times and knew it merely needed steam now, not disassociated hydrogen and oxygen flaring and hurling the shuttle into space, where he'd only been as far as the freighter orbit. "We're only going around Volcano Island."

A humming sound came from the shuttle's bowels, where the magnetic bottle, containing its hydrogen fusion, produced heat. There was hissing as the water turned to steam and a roar from the dual-purpose thruster as the shuttle surged across the wide lake, steam billowing behind its high-finned tail.

"Look at that little canoe over there," the bodyguard shouted, surprised and suspicious because it seemed to be headed toward the forbidden island. Its paddlers noticed the shuttle's course and, as if they had guilty consciences, turned back to the mainland.

The volcanic cone squatted on the contorted rim of a half-drowned meteoric crater. The bodyguard knew this lone volcano had burst from a crack while the planet was being distorted by the remolecularization of rock from its poles. The crater had cooled while he had been a little boy. But smoke rose from a recent split in its flank.

The main reason people with Centralist tendencies had established a village beside the cone, upon the meteoric rim which enclosed the harbor, was to tap the volcano's heat for use in illegal manufacturing. They had begun making metal forks and spoons—and sharper things that the bodyguard secretly wished he could own. Daggers. Ever more powerful weapons.

CENTRALISTS were never satisfied, he thought, and now their village was deserted. Wonderful things had been thrown into the lake. His visualization of those beautiful lost weapons made his heart pound with desire. He wanted again, on this errand, to search the crater for unfinished weapons but the old man was along. The bodyguard glared toward the mainland.

"There's another canoe," the bodyguard shouted harshly. "See, from that new village—a long dark canoe?"

And it didn't seem intimidated by the shuttle. The bodyguard thought it might be headed for the island—or its dozen paddlers might simply be loyal Decentralists going fishing. He remembered that some of the Centralists had been dispersed along the shore adjacent to the new village after Mr. Decent had ordered the volcanic island evacuated.

While the shuttle cruised around it, the bodyguard watched for telltale gulls, but there was no sign of the customs inspector's body.

"Go into the harobr," Mr. Decentralist said unexpectedly.

The bodyguard's heart thudded as they entered the harbor's rocky jaws. Big Village clung to the cliffs, deathly silent, its empty-eyed stone huts staring at him. He felt both guilt and pride and clutched his fish spear as if it were—a weapon. It was here he had shown he was a—man.

A gull fluttered from the water, but it had been feeding on a big dead fish. The bodyguard knew the volcanic cone above Big Village had polluted its harbor even more than its air. He winced and felt nostalgia, remembering Big Village that final day when it had been alive with runaway girls singing and illegal forges clanging.

He had been a youth in the angry armada of paddlers from the little villages who had cautiously approached this Centralist stronghold. He had felt awe and envy when he had seen how rich and populous Big Village had become. There were more than two hundred huts. Centralists had crowded the stone dock. His heart had leaped when he had seen they had already manufactured three of the Supreme Weapons. All three had glinted in the sunlight.

Now he scowled, peering down at the dark, deep water of the harbor.

But Mr. Decent's voice was crying: "Look up there."

A blade of sunlight illuminated a tiny red stain on the volcano's flank, high above the dead village and the old man was moaning: "Henry, Henry—"

The bodyguard realized this was where their falling customs inspector had struck the planet like a meteorite. His gaze rose to the lip of the crater and he tried to suppress his desire to enter it. This wasn't a good time, although the rim was only a few minutes climb above the red splash of Henry-david.

"I've got to go up," Mr. Decent bleated. "Henry, oh, Henry—"

The bodyguard began to argue that it was forbidden to land on the island. "You made the rule. Anyway this may be a trap."

But the distraught old man ordered the pilot to bring the shuttle alongside the algae-shrouded stone dock.

"That canoe may get here soon," the bodyguard warned.

"They may be coming because they saw him fall."

But there was no use arguing with the old man and, unless the wind changed so that the paddlers could open their sailing umbrellas, the bodyguard knew the canoe couldn't get here for at least an hour. He started to follow the old man on to the dock. His own desire rose.

He slipped. Algae had grown where there had been blood, he realized, and he recovered his natural alertness. He jumped back aboard the shuttle before it could escape. His fish spear backed the pilot toward one of the aluminum containers.

"Open it. Now dump out those pamphlets. Pamphlets? Anyway get in. You won't smother. The lid doesn't fit that well." He tightened the straps. "Don't go away," he said, clambering out on the shuttle's deck. He made it fast to a stone cleat on the dock.

HE RAN after the old man, through the crumbling village of memories. When the armada had approached it Big Village had illegally contained at least a thousand people, although the maximum permissible size for a community on this instaplanet was a hundred. It was a fabulous place, and young runaways had flocked to it. He remembered smiling with excitement rather than fear, even when he had seen its three supreme weapons gleaming.

Mr. Decent had boldly landed on the dock to negotiate or accuse.

"You've already taken away the nuc-boxes from five villages, depriving them of electricity."

"You old hypocrite," the mayor of the Big Village had retorted. "You complain about us taking their electricity, but you've been urging them to decentralize into tens—or families to live without electricity. Look, we have so many people here who need it, we ought to have ten electric-boxes, not five. Listen, Earth sends a box to this planet for each hundred people, so we have the right to proportional allocation of electric power. We ought to have ten boxes."

"No. You're rebuilding all the confusion and greed we tried to leave behind on Earth," the old man had shouted. "You're even manufacturing inhuman weapons."

All three glinted sharply in the sunlight.

Mr. Decentralist had rashly grabbed at one. When he had fallen down during the scuffle, his shrill Decentralists had begun scrambling from their canoes to the dock, thrusting out their fishing spears like weapons.

"Defense," the mayor had yelled over his shoulder and the three holders of the supreme weapons had waddled forward, deflecting fish-spears with their aluminum shields and raising their beautiful steel weapons.

As their blades flashed in the sunlight the future bodyguard's heart had pounded with desire instead of fear even as the centralists attacked.

They struck off hands and arms and heads in a frantic display of power. Instead of fleeing, he had circled. A Centralist had slipped on the blood and fallen, his supreme weapon clanging against the stones.

The future bodyguard had rushed forward and wrested away the sword.

Now it's mine, he had thought excitedly, gripping its hilt.

The second swordsman had waddled toward him. He had dodged the thrust. These three supreme weapons were so valuable that they had been carried by three of the most important men in Big Village, fat, middle-aged men.

With youthful quickness the bodyguard-to-be had swung his great blade back and forth. It had struck his opponent's neck. Now that he had the knack of it the bodyguard-to-be had rushed at the third middle-aged man. Around him the excited Decentralists had attacked with their fish spears. Blood sprayed.

The Big Villagers had scattered, ending the strangely abrupt battle and beginning the problem of what to do with so many defeated people who were still Centralists at heart.

Now, as the bodyguard ran upward through the empty village after the old man, he thought the wind might be changing. The long canoe could be approaching rapidly. It might be filled with Centralist renegades, returning.

On the side of the volcano he saw Mr. Decent kneel in the great red splash. The old man seemed to be murmuring to a fragment of Henrydavid's safetysuit. He was picking it up.

The bodyguard climbed past, hurrying to reach the top to spot the canoe over there—and for another reason.

FROM the rim of the volcano he looked out over the immense wind-wrinkled lake and the lonely land beyond, glittering with countless crater-ponds, where the old man wanted people to spread out in smaller groups in an ever simpler way of life.

The bodyguard smiled and shook his head. The long dark canoe was still a long way off. Whether it contained faithful Decentralist fishermen or unrepentant Centralist rebels, they were still paddling against the wind. His heart leaped. He might have time to search the crater.

He peered down into the darkly jumbled funnel and his heart pounded as it had when he had seized the sword in the Battle of Big Village. The greatest disappointment of his life had come after the fighting, when the old

man had honored him by choosing him as his new bodyguard and then told him to throw all three swords into the lake.

The bodyguard had secretly returned later and dredged for them, cursing and crying because he had stupidly thrown away their power.

No unfinished swords had been found in Big Village and he thought the illegal weapons forge might have been concealed in this crater. As he descended, his snub nose wrinkled at the sulphurous strench. He searched under lava ledges for even an unfinished sword, which could give him power to—

His eyes widened. At the bottom, beside a vertical split where steaming rainwater drained out of the crater, he saw something white and rumpled. He clutched his fish spear like a weapon and clambered down, sending rocks rattling.

His eyes widened. The whiteness was a folded parachute partially covering an escape bag. Except for its ablative foot cone, the bag lay flat. It was a different model from the twelve in the shuttle. He could see it was empty. No one was on the nearby rocks. The bag was open. He thought the inspector must have fallen out—but why would he have been in an escape bag descending into the crater?

Anyone peering through the bag's periscope could have steered its chute toward the volcano. Any man could have been breathing from its oxygen tank. The bodyguard didn't think Henrydavid would have had a reason to ride down in an escape bag.

He clutched his spear and looked around quickly, but no one was crouching in ambush among the rocks.

"Don't move," a hoarse voice said and the parachute cloth squirmed. A swollen-faced, middle-aged man had been lying motionless underneath it. A gleaming metal rod with a round hole in its end was pointing out at the bodyguard. The man sat up. "Throw away your spear—that's right."

The bodyguard's heart was again drumming with excitement rather than fear as he stared at this absolutely ultimate weapon which could change life on his instaplanet. Its barrel and folding stock were gleaming with the promise of power. One of the man's hands gripped its long bullet clip. The other enclosed its trigger mechanism. The bodyguard shivered with desire because he wanted the weapon more than anything in the universe.

"Stop smiling," the man's voice shrilled as if he were in great pain. "Who are you?"

"A fisherman," the bodyguard finally answered, surprised the man hadn't recognized him from the Battle of Big Village or its aftermath. "I just climbed here to—"

"Don't move. I'll shoot." The parachutist's blotchy face grimaced, smiled, then looked disappointed. "Don't you know who I am?"

"No," the bodyguard lied, his thoughts racing between the future and the past.

He began to glimpse the brilliant scheme by which this exiled mayor of Big Village had hoped to reenter the instaplanet undetected. The falling spark on the radar screen—anyone familiar with the operation of the shuttle would have reasoned it to be the Customs Inspector falling all alone because of some accident? But Henrydavid had not fallen alone.

The pilot had been part of the conspiracy, the fat-faced pilot—The bodyguard imagined the scene inside the shuttle, among the containers from the freighter. The pilot must have struck Henrydavid on the head. Then this blotchy-faced man had emerged from a container and dragged out his special escape bag from another. He would have tied Henrydavid's body to the outside of this bag, using one of its parachute control lines and a slip-knot. After arranging the bag against the hatch iris the Centralist ex-mayor must have sealed himself inside it and waited.

The bodyguard's eyes widened in admiration. When the shuttle had approached the smoke from the volcanic island the pilot must have knocked the valve off the reserve air tank. The sudden increase in air pressure had blown the flexible iris outward and the escape bag had hurtled into space, falling diagonally toward the island and appearing on their radar screen as a single spark. No wonder it had seemed surprisingly large to represent one man.

The bodyguard smiled at this fabulous ex-mayor who must have yanked the extra control line at the last moment, freeing himself from the weight of Henrydavid's body as the escape bag vanished into the radar-confusing smoke. He had deployed the drogue chute. After his main chute opened, he had skillfully steered it to his island, disappearing into the volcanic crater.

The bodyguard's smile became a grin because, in landing down here, the man seemed to have broken his leg.

"Let me help you—to climb out of here."

"Keep away."

The gun barrel rose. The Centralist's thick body shifted and his face contorted in pain. His left leg had an unusual bend in it.

THE bodyguard nodded obediently, waiting his chance. His gaze devoured the beautiful gun, the first he had ever seen except in smuggled pictures.

"Is it called a sub-machine gun?"

"You don't even know who I am," the middle-aged man exclaimed angrily. "You don't know what to do."

The bodyguard considered the dagger concealed in his kirtle and said, "Let me help or you'll die down here."

He thought whipping out his dagger would take too long. He'd better grab at the gun.

"Look, there's blood leaking where you opened that leg-zip on your suit. A compound fracture?"

"Stay back," the man rasped. "I don't need you. Others are coming to this island to meet me."

"In canoes?" The bodyguard feigned surprise. He doubted the man could have seen that long canoe through his periscope while his bag was descending. "There aren't any canoes out there—except mine. So you need my help. I've always wanted the good things they have on Earth. I wish I'd been born there—with all the autocars and television boxes, and great cities—"

While he tried to sound like a Centralist, his voice grew so convincing that what he said became true. He realized how much he wanted what the Centralists wanted, and he watched that beautiful gun barrel lowering as the parachutist's arms relaxed. In a little while he would have an opportunity to grab this wonderful submachinegun, the ultimate weapon on the instaplanet.

Rocks rattled behind him. He whirled. Up there a half-naked, scrawny figure was clambering down from the rim.

"Who's that?" the parachutist hissed.

"Another fisherman," the bodyguard lied hopelessly.

"Wave to him to come down." Evidently the Centralist thought he might need two to carry him up.

"He already is coming," the bodyguard gritted, wishing that old man would see the gun and run. Mr. Decent had upset his plan before he could execute it. He had intended to hide the sub-machinegun after taking care of the parachutist—and to return for it later. But Mr. Decent must see the gun by now and eventually he would tell his bodyguard to drop it into the lake. The bodyguard scowled.

The old man was scrambling down clutching a bloody scrap of cloth as if it were all that was left of Henrydavid.

"You!"

"You! Don't come any closer." The parachutist's aim shifted between the bodyguard and the old Decentralist. "I'll shoot you, you old hypocrite."

"You agreed not to return," Mr. Decent wheezed as the wind wailed above the crater. "Why are you here?"

High above the old man's jagged face volcanic smoke writhed across the sky and the bodyguard realized the wind had changed. In

their long canoe the fishermen who might be Centralists would be opening their sailing umbrellas. Their dark canoe would be surging toward the island. The bodyguard's young, wide, muscular body felt as if it were swelling. He couldn't wait much longer. While he watched for a chance to leap at the gun, he felt as strong and quick as when he had dodged those sword thrusts. He supposed a bullet wouldn't be much faster than a sword and it was such a little thing. The round eye of the gun muzzle stared at him.

"Move back," the parachutist hissed. "Closer to Mr.—Decentralist."

The bodyguard smiled and didn't move, silently willing Mr. Decent not to remark that a long canoe was coming. The parachutist would assume it carried the Centralist activists who were supposed to meet him. He would feel free to squeeze the trigger, shooting the old man. But the bodyguard couldn't conceive of himself being killed and leaned toward the Centralist leader, waiting for his opportunity.

"You can't become mayor of an empty village," Mr. Decent's voice bargained. "I let you go before. I'll let you go back to Earth again."

"Hypocrite!" the ex-mayor cried. "You talked of peace and individual freedom but led the attack on Big Village. It would have been kinder if you'd executed me then. This is my island. Where are my people now?"

"Dispersed," the old man retorted. "Enjoying pure and simple lives again."

"He's a fanatic," the Centralist hissed frantically to the bodyguard, "a fanatic old man. He thinks a hundred people are too many for a village. He wants to disperse families, one to a pond—and after that what?"

"Transcendant freedom," the old man replied "to contemplate."

"Freedom to isolate yourself beside a pond," the Centralist cried, "on a bare planet and think about what? You hypocrite, already in your little villages there's no freedom for young people to do what they want to do, which is to get together and—"

"They're growing up unspoiled." Mr. Decent looked to his young bodyguard, who realized that both of them, the old man and the middle-aged man, the Decentralist and the Centralist, were speaking to him rather than to each other.

"This old man is trying to be a mental jailer for you young people. Listen!" The parachutist obviously wanted his help and allegiance. "Listen—"

EACH seemed to be trying to win him, to use him, as if he represented all of the young people on the planet, its future.

The Centralist insisted: "It's

this old man's fault your instaplanet is tied to an unfair economic plan. That damned plan for economic decentralization was written by bureaucrats on Earth for the benefit of Earth. That's why we weren't allowed to manufacture anything. That's why villages were limited to a hundred people. In that inhuman plan all we're supposed to do is catch fish and send their glandular extracts to Earth. Listen, unless we centralize, our instaplanets' unfavorable balance of trade will keep us poor colonial slaves."

"Who needs trade?" the old man retorted. "Good Decentralists are learning to do without Earth's corrupting products. We have fish and health-giving algae. We can weave kirtles and build stone shelters. We can become free of Earth trash. We don't need that accursed shuttle any more. We don't have to rely on Earth.

"That's right," the Centralist interrupted and smiled at the young man. "When we have a great industrial city we won't have to rely as much on Earth. We can enjoy—"

"—polluting our lives!" the Decentralist shouted. "We came here to escape evil and noise and greed. That's why we had to accept that Economic Plan, so Earth would pay our transportation here."

The parachutist nodded and stared at the young man. "Yes, after the Bureau of Colonization created air and water on this planet it wrote our unfairly limited Economic Plan so we'd always be dependent on them." He grimaced and hissed with pain, trying to move his leg. "It contradicted our Constitution," he added bitterly.

"You signed the Plan though," the old man said.

"So did you—and I was younger than you and innocent then," the middle-aged parachutist retorted. "You hypocrite! You signed the Economic Plan—but in your own way you're trying to be free of it, too. You've been telling villagers to forget their material needs, to stop sending fish extracts to Earth. You claim we'll be free of Earth your way if we'll scatter from this lake to isolated ponds. To philosophic idiocy. But most of us want the freedom to build a great city. We'll have our own independent industries. That's the way to be free of Earth."

The Centralist looked hopefully at the young man, who was smiling at the sub-machinegun.

The bodyguard wished the Decentralists and Centralists could agree beyond the need for independence from Earth. He wished each group would simply follow its own desires. What he wanted was the gun.

"Keep back," rasped the parachutist, aiming between them.

"Give up," the old man demanded. "Give up the gun."

"Hypocrite!" the Centralist cried. "It was you who used force against us. First you old hypocrites tore out the last page of our Constitution, so you could feel free to attack us. You tore out the right to assemble, to choose a way of life, to build a city. All that was in our Constitution until you old men became so terrified you tore it out. You stole freedom from our young people." He looked at the young man. "Our Constitution was written on Earth by experts and was above the Economic Plan. Ask him what happened to its last page."

The young bodyguard had been vaguely aware that there was a weathered copy of the Constitution on display in his village, but he had never gotten around to reading it. He shrugged.

"The majority of our elders in all the villages voted to remove the last page," Mr. Decent wheezed, "because it was necessary to defend our villages from you—"

"Hypocrite! That wasn't the reason," the Centralist gasped.

"It was," Mr. Decent retorted. "We can't permit violations of Decentralism which would seduce our young people. We can't permit corruptions such as Big Village if our way of life is to survive. You criminal, you murderer—" the old man pointed a finger red with the blood of his customs inspector— "you murdered Henry-david, didn't you?"

The old man began to shiver violently with scrawny rage. The bodyguard expected him to leap at the Centralist. Now he hoped the parachutist would shoot Mr. Decent—that instant would be his opportunity to grab the gun, all its power!

The young bodyguard's face hardened. The parachutist raised the gun.

"Give it to me," The old man stepped toward the ex-mayor and reached out his hand for the submachinegun as if he were simply dealing with another young Decentralist villager. "I say, give it to me!"

As the gunman's own tendons tightened, the bodyguard saw he was going to shoot. He was going to kill Mr. Decentralist. The act was no longer in his imagination—it was going to be real. The bodyguard lunged faster than thought in a conditioned reflex called duty and his hand grabbed the submachinegun's barrel, yanking it aside as it roared. It was hammering and burning, slapping his chest so hard he fell backward and the rocks seemed soft.

He hadn't expected this. He had wanted the old man—the old order—to die. But he had saved Mr. Decent's life.

HE CLUNG to the gun, to its warmly quiet smoothness. As he sat up he was amazed at how

much his chest hurt when he coughed. Blood was splattering all over the gleaming mechanism. Frantically he tried to wipe it off. He wanted to say something.

"You've shot him," Mr. Decent's distant voice was yelling at someone. "He's dying."

The bodyguard couldn't remember having shot anyone. He clung to the gun, knowing he hadn't fired it yet, but to do so was what he wanted more than anything in the world. His hand searched along its slipperiness for the trigger. He wanted to feel its power blasting—to release all his strength. He had the ultimate weapon.

In the dizzily fluctuating light and darkness he became aware that the Centralist was crawling toward him, dragging a broken leg, reaching out to retrieve the gun.

"Shoot, shoot," the old man's voice was shouting.

The bodyguard needed to pull the trigger, but as his numbed fingers groped for it he saw Mr. Decentralist's angular shadow hurl itself upon the Centralist. They were struggling on the rocks, Decentralist and Centralist indistinguishable in this crazy darkness in his head. As if he were going blind, the bodyguard peered out, trying to see which of his enemies was on top.

If he shot the Centralist, he knew Mr. Decent would thank him then and later tell him to drop this wonderful sub-machinegun into the lake where the swords had been lost.

The bodyguard's mind rebelled dimly while they thrashed about in the crater. If he shot Mr. Decent instead—he wondered if the grateful parachutist would let him keep the gun? Not for long. In his veins he felt the dark canoe approaching. Even if he joined them, he knew the Centralists would sieze the gun because it was the ultimate power.

"Shoot, shoot—" a strange, hoarse voice was shouting.

In his darkness he felt his power swelling with realization that he could shoot both of them while they struggled, entwined. His finger began to curl around the trigger while his imagination hurried to strip off the parachutist's safety suit. Its smoothly metallized cloth became a perfect fit for him, shiny and unsullied by the bullet holes in his body. He pushed the Centralist's bloody, bullet-riddled body under a ledge and it vanished as if from a dream.

In that overlapping instant all the men from the dark canoe stood around the volcano's rim like teeth and he was gurgling: "Come down. We will build a great city." They became towers around his harbor. He led them to the mainland, covering the whole instaplanet with his city of power. "That's not all I want—"

His finger was squeezing the slippery metal hull of the shuttle and it roared deafeningly, capturing the freighters in orbit. When his glittering armada landed on Earth, he gripped the hot steel microphone and gurgled sensuously. His great fleet was rising from all over his Earth. With his finger rigidly contracted on the vibrant trigger, he sprayed his power outward through the darkness of the Universe.

THE old man kneeled in perplexed horror beside his bodyguard. The canoemen clambered down from the rim. Their thick faces glanced from the corpse of the parachutist, whose forehead had been crushed, as if by a brutal caveman, by Mr. Decentralist's jagged rock—to the young bodyguard, who lay on his back, clutching the sub-machine gun.

His chest had been riddled by bullets during that Pavlovian instant when he had yanked the gun away from the parachutist by its barrel and saved the old man. He had fallen backward with it, coughing and writhing, splattering the rocks with his blood, while his numbing hands searched its slippery steel. His forefinger still gripped the trigger of the emptied sub-machinegun. His eyes—

The most massive of the fishermen wrenched the gun away, grunting excitedly. "We seen a parachute come down," he told Mr. Decent. "We come. We broke your rule again, but we landed on this island. Good thing. This is a—gun!"

The old man looked up along the fisherman's bulky torso to his greedily grinning face. Plainly this was not a thoughtful man who would be satisfied with the solitude and austerity of hiw own Walden Pond.

"Where are the rest of the bullets?" the big fisherman croaked while the other thick-bodied men crowded around.

The old man looked down past his own thin fingers, stained with blood, to the splay feet and heavy legs of these fishermen, who still must consider themselves Decentralists. But he felt a hot wind whirling in the crater; as if from the future, heard their hoarse voices arguing as they struggled for the gun.

"Where are the bullets?"

In the hot crater Mr. Decentralist felt his life-long beliefs shriveling. He became terrified that this barren instaplanet had defeated his ideals and dreams. A hoarse-voiced generation of greedy Centralists seemed as close as his death.

The unexplainable bullet-wound in his side bled. After this—whom could he trust?

Bending over his young bodyguard's inscrutably dead face, the old man wept.

He felt his power draining away.

●


He had put in a lifetime—hating what he himself had become!

THE BEAST OF 309

T.J. BASS

I

FOUR-YEAR-OLD CAESAR was wheeled out of the operating room and returned to his crib in Orphanage 309. Time: 7:50 hours in the year 1104 Deneb Implant Time. A bulky white bandage covered his face at eye level. He slept soundly for most of the rest of the day—his red-headed, freckled-face form half buried in the soft pillow and blankets. Toys watched. Although he was too young to understand—he had just lost his left eye.

Awakening late in the evening, he found that his only visual contact with the world was through a pinhole in a shield over his right eye. Puzzled, he found that if he moved his gaze from that pinhole he saw only blackness and the movement twinged the raw ocular muscles in the left socket. Turning carefully at neck and waist, he surveyed his crib—chamois dog, tattered pillow and red ball. As he found each item he pulled it into his lap, cradling it there. They were his world. Nothing was missing. Nothing, that is, except the eye.

The Healer, solemn and graying, visited him daily. Impersonal younger parameds tended to his essential needs. He had no other visitors. He rolled his ball back and forth in the crib and talked to his dog.

Several weeks later the bandage was replaced by a small, black patch. The pin-holed shield was removed.

"You can open your eye, Little Caesar. I've dimmed the window," said the paramed as he gathered up the tangle of bandages.

Caesar screwed up his freckled face and peeked around his room. The lunch tray had been brought in and the aroma caught his attention.

"May I go outside and play?" asked Caesar.

"Check with Library after you've eaten," was the paramed's curt reply. He left Caesar to his tray.

Dumping all the crisp croutons into the thyme-flavored consommé, Caesar munched rapidly. Then, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he picked up his red ball and started out into the corridor. Fingering the wall for stability, he made his way into the Library and stood before the large mahogany desk. Healer was seated in the soft desk chair and was speaking in a soft monotone. Caesar waited. As the Healer finished, he stood up and smiled at Caesar.

"Please be seated, Caesar," said Library as Healer went out. Caesar placed his ball into the chair's pillowy recesses and climbed up onto the seat.

"And how do we feel today?" asked Library.

"Okay, I guess," said Caesar. "May I go out and play?"

Library paused. Its class IX

brain processed the request against Caesar's ambulatory status.

It answered, "Healer says that you may go outside today—for walking. You may not run, jump or otherwise engage in strenuous activity. Understand?"

A distracting man punctuated each sentence.

"Yes, Library," said Caesar. He climbed down, picked up his ball and started for the sunlit doorway. Library returned to its inner ruminations—menu planning and inventory checking.

CAESAR squinted about the playground. Deneb stood straight up. A class VII gardener trimmed and mowed, filling the air with the odor of green cytoplasm. Restless dust occasionally jumped in a breeze. Several yards away one of the older boys—Arnold—leaned idly on a pair of bright metal crutches and drew lines in the yellow-ocher dust with the rubber heel of his walking cast. He was one of the Long Runners and was mending a torn heel cord. When he saw Caesar he waved cheerily.

Caesar gave his ball an experimental toss—holding his head cocked to center it in his single visual field. The ball disobeyed him and rolled past Arnold. Holding both crutches in his left hand, Arnold balanced on his good foot and scooped up the ball.

"Catch."

Caesar watched its bouncing approach. It was raising little white puffs of dust as it came. He sidled into its path and closed his hands over—nothing. The ball avoided his hands and rolled up onto the freshly cut grass.

"Come on, One-eye. You can do better'n that," shouted Arnold.

Caesar picked up the ball. Setting his jaw, he returned to face Arnold. He threw with great concentration but the ball went wide again. Arnold shrugged, got a good grip on his crutches and started hobbling after it. Caesar didn't play ball very long that day.

Although he was saddened by the ball's sudden contrariness, he still let it stay in his crib at night. He didn't understand the role that binocular vision played in depth perception. All he knew was that he had lost a friend in his ball.

The left socket granulated smoothly and he was fitted with a glassy prosthesis. It was heavy, and moving it around was good exercise for the nubbins of ocular muscle that remained under the scar. Although it moved sluggishly and lacked some of the sparkle of his good eye, it did fill out the space under the lid cosmetically. Actually, Little Caesar was less concerned about his lost eye than about his lost ability to play ball. Learning to throw and catch had been sort of a milestone in his

musculo-skeletal development—and now it was gone.

One evening, after an unusually disappointing day on the playground, he climbed up onto Library's soft seat and asked: "Why can't I play ball any more?"

"Everyone is different," answered the desk. "Some children play team games—like ball. Others must go it alone. Try the Long Run, Caesar. Trade your ball for a canteen."

That night Caesar climbed into his crib with his pillow, toy dog and the canteen. He missed his ball at first, but the canteen—shaped like a flattened ball—had a resilient, fiber outer cover. It wasn't uncomfortable. He'd adjust to sleeping with it.

THE canteen served him well. It carried the 0.7 liters of water which enabled him to make the Long Run comfortably. The course—an invigorating six miles through the wooded hills behind the Orphanage—attracted him immediately. His canteen symbolized maturity. Six months later he had won status in his peer group with his comfortable ten-minute-mile pace. Older boys often saved their deserts for him if he would set the pace for their training runs. During his remaining years at Orphanage 309 he was known as the wandering pacemaker.

As adolescence approached, Caesar discovered that he couldn't spend all of his life in the solitude of running. His missing eye caused some anxiety which was undirected, until he transformed it into simple hatred. Hatred for the bogyman whom the older boys had blamed for his loss. At 309 the children explained away all unexpected tragedies with this concept of an unseen, evil demon—The Beast. The Beast roamed their nightmares and filled their conversation.

Library, inspired by its paternal circuits, called Caesar in. "There is no Beast," it counseled. "You have to face the real world, Caesar. Forget childhood fantasy. Your eye must have been removed for a very good reason. It probably was diseased or contained a tumor like a melanoma or retinoblastoma. It was done to save your life, undoubtedly. A bogyman can't just slip in here and perform a clandestine enucleation.

"You'll be graduating soon. I've placed you in competition for Starship Academy. Effort may win you a ship of your own. Every quantum of mental energy will be needed. You'll have none to spare on fantasy."

"Starship Academy?" said Caesar, stunned.

"And don't worry about the expense. You have been left a generous legacy for education," added Library.

"From my parents?" asked Caesar awkwardly.

Library winced his telltales. "We never mention that here at Three-o-nine. It is sufficient to realize that they existed once—out of biological necessity—but for us they exist no more. They have left you with good genes and an adequate legacy. That is all you need know."

Library closed the subject and its telltales went from a cautious amber-two to a more relaxed green. Caeser stood up—a bigger Caesar now—with lean limbs and a few red chin whiskers. Testosterone had begun to alter his physiology and psyche. His larger larynx resonated more deeply; protein and calcium had been added to his frame. Deep, warm reflexes had changed his attitude toward females.

STARSHIP Academy placed Caesar in tough intellectual competition. He likened it to the long run—going it alone mentally—grinding his way through theory, practice and new concepts.

The nagging Beast dwelled in the back of his subconscious and drained his metal energy. One day it came abruptly to the surface as he was studying an optic playback in exobiology. The subject was a dark, hairy arachnoid. Sensory probes had recorded its activities on one of the newly colonized planets about four parsecs from Deneb. Neglecting the scale, Caesar assumed he was watching a little spider rearranging its wet, white eggs in its nest. The focus was indistinct. He imagined he was watching the Beast running off with his eye. Or was it his ball? Shuddering, as the scale became obvious, he realized why the new colonies on the arachnoid's planet were having such a difficult time getting established. The arachnoid was huge and the moist objects it was carrying were skulls—human skulls.

Caesar remained frozen to the viewer, trying to gather his wits. The recording ended and there followed the nice relaxing view of an anatomy drawing. The internal organs of the alien spider-like creature were diagramed in color, with reassuring labels.

The academy years were not easy ones for Caesar, but he learned his lessons well and won his spaceship—Jen-B—a cybernette with a very female facade. His physiological parameters were wired into her sensors. One of her first observations was that he was too concerned about his missing eye. She understood it as: "an unmated male with an infirmity—" and suggested that he try the Organ Banks for a replacement.

Caesar objected: "Organ Banks do not carry whole eyes. Eyes are extensions of the Central Nervous System, and CNS tissue just isn't banked. You're thinking of corneas."

Jen-B checked her memory

bank. "No—I'm certain that eyes can be replaced—whole eyes. The technique is called Genetic Carbon Copying. It is complex and expensive. But I'll be tied up for a while getting our assignment. Why don't you check with the local O.B. office—ask for GCC."

She orbited Caesar down in the scooter. He studied his dull, heavy prosthesis in the mirror—after almost a fourth of a century he had grown accustomed to seeing it peeking out from under his left eye lid. Still, the prospect of a real eye excited him.

AS SOON as he entered the outer office of Organ Banks he felt a yearning for good health. The decor strongly suggested youth and vigor—holograms of towering softwoods, thundering surf and copious waterfalls. The brown-eyed girl, attractive and slightly erotic, stirred him. He was suddenly grateful that he was shopping for an eye and not a set of gonads.

He explained why he was there and she quickly went into a sales patter: "Our Genetic Carbon Copy is precisely what you need. It will match your right eye exactly—in size, color and antigens. Same genes—same antigens. No danger of rejection. It will be a complete eye—optic nerve, retina, lens and sclera—grown from your own genetic material. It is true that an ordinary eye from another doner will not work satisfactorily. We can't match the antigens close enough. CNS tissue is very critical that way. Even the slightest rejection can prove fatal because of the cross reaction with your own brain tissues. Any antibody will have some cross reactions with other similar antigens. In CNS tissues this is quickly fatal. Even a small amount of antibody can upset the membrane activity of a nerve cell—psychoses and demyelinating diseases like multiple sclerosis result. But the GCC—since it is your own tissue—doesn't have any of those problems."

He wasn't sure he understood most of what she was trying to tell him. He hesitated.

"It all sounds so complicated. I'm not so sure that—" he began.

"Now we don't have to decide immediately," she said soothingly. "First let's see if you are a potential candidate for a transplant."

She led him into a small examining booth and made a big ceremony out of washing her hands. She asked him to remove the artificial eye and examined the empty socket with a scented finger. Then she placed an EEG sensor over the back of his head and asked him to shut his right eye. She tickled the empty socket with a microvolt probe and watched the EEG readout.

"Looks like your optic nerve hasn't scarred too badly," she said. "Its axons are gone, of course; but

the new ones will grow from the ganglion cells in the transplanted retina. I'd say you're an excellent candidate for a transplant."

She washed her hands again. He replaced the prosthesis and blinked it into place.

"Now there is the matter of the fee. Growing the GCC eye runs into seven figures," she said.

"Deneb credits?" he asked casually.

"Stellar megafrancs," she said.

He sputtered.

She looked pained. "I'm dreadfully sorry, Caesar. I just assumed that you knew. Our customers pay their own way, of course. There are the costs of the culture tanks, embryonating equipment biochemists and technicians, monitoring devices and finally the surgery itself. Growing a GCC is a very exacting proceedure—and very expensive."

He left as gracefully as he could. Stellar megafrancs meant a lifetime of saving—or a big gamble won. If he hoped to earn that kind of money he'd have to try patrolling the Los Coyotes Diagonal, where he had a chance of earning hazard premiums plus possible salvage. He might make his megafranc there, if he survived.

II

DUTY on the Los Coyotes Diagonal—trade route to the Dog Star—consisted of months of boredom interspersed with moments of terror. Fifty parsecs of empty space—no biologically friendly planets—not even a manned satellite. Natural hazards were minimal on the route. However, like other uninhabited routes on the edge of the human-occupied sectors, the diagonal had its share of random, weird kidnapings. An occasional starship would be stripped of its human complement—crew and any genetic cargo. The ship itself, its tools, weapons, and other items of human wealth were left intact. Violence was absent.

The usual assumption involved a hypothetical race of advanced aliens—dubbed The Dregs by the popular press—aliens who valued humans for some reason but had no use for human tools. Caesar found it hard to imagine a race whose technology or ethics prevented them from seizing the ships along with the men; but he agreed that he was the best man to hunt them. He had been hunting his own personal Beast most of his life and hunting the unseen Dregs was very much the same. Statistics showed that kidnapings involved the freighters and more sluggish Implant ships. The presence of a single high-performance starship anywhere on the route seemed to protect it. Insurance cartels paid well for this type of duty. He and Jen-B cruised about, testing their

energy weapons and setting out noisy beacons—making their presence known.

"Wake up. Caesar. Derelict ahead," called Jen-B.

Six years of false alarms and he still felt a chill at the thought of meeting the Dregs. He suited up and watched the screen. A ship appeared—an old human model.

"She's quiet. No signs of energy in her hull," said Jen-B. They stood off and bounced a variety of signals off the derelict—even nudged it a bit with a tractor beam. Nothing happened.

"Might as well go on board. See what I can find," said Caesar.

If the Dregs had struck the ship he knew what to expect. No humans would be left on board.

But he found humans. Dead ones. An all-male crew of thirty-seven plus a score of passengers —both sexes—all dead of natural causes that could be summed up as old age.

Jen-B sent her servomech prowling about the derelict's hull in search of answers. It dug around in a cold reactor core, energized a few senile circuits and sampled several of the frozen and dried corpses. Caesar searched the cabins. He found no signs of violence. Several examples of poor housekeeping suggested that the older survivors had lost some of their mental facilities. He found a handwritten diary in one of the uniform pockets. The last dozen pages were mostly illegible except for the repeated entry: "Bay A-3."

Bay A-3 was in the cargo section. The derelict had carried a payload of Water World Biota—valuable flora and fauna that represented millions of years of aquatic evolution. A rich genetic cargo —still suspended and, apparently, still viable. Caesar moved among the bays until he came to A-3. He paused at the hatch fumbling with his thick gloves. Inside, he waited for his suit light to brighten.

The bay had been stripped of most of its suspended biota and a makeshift tank had been constructed. A tiny mummy occupied the tank. It took him a moment to realize that it was the body of a human baby-- probably around ten pound size. From the looks of the wires and tubes the tank was the work of someone with little knowledge of the suspension process. He hoped the infant had been dead before it had been hooked up—mercifully dead. Water World suspension tanks did not modify to human support easily. He returned to the Control Section.

The servomech was busy with the astrogational components of the derelict.

"I think we can get her moving. This may be the salvage that we've been looking for," Jen-B said over his helmet communicator.

"What happened? Why is everyone dead?"

"Computer failure," answered Jen-B. "This is one of the older models—fully automated—one mechanical intelligence. No backups. Evidently no one on board could rig the warp drive for manual override. That would probably have been suicide anyway. Fortunately this is a greenhouse class—there was plenty of food and oxygen for the humans to live out their life spans. But out here on the Diagonal nothing is within range of a conventional drive. They just lived out their lives between stars. They could see their pile running down so they didn't try to raise children. "The one infant you saw in Bay A-3 was probably an accidental birth. Without energy to run the hydroponics section they knew how long the ship could support life; and there are no facilities on board to suspend humans."

No, there wouldn't be, thought Caesar. That was one of the advantages of a greenhouse starship. You made the trip warm.

REFUELED, the derelict moved and, with the servomech providing the "brains," it managed to limp back to Deneb on the laser tail of Jen-B. After picking up their credits at Salvage—almost an even megafranc—Jen-B checked in at the Academy and Caesar started out for the Organ Banks.

He stopped off at Orphanage 309 on the way.

Weathering had lowered the hills behind the playground and the trees looked stouter; but the building was unchanged. A nostalgic Caesar entered the Library. He was no longer the pliant youth of 309. Gray streaked his red hair. Freckles had fused into a diffuse bronze under the actinic stimulation of alien suns. Trunk and extremities had thickened with added muscle and gristle.

"Remember me?" he asked the desk.

A hum under the floor tickled his feet. After a few moments the speaker coughed and said, "You are the wandering pacemaker—Little Caesar with the legacy."

"I've just returned from a tour of duty on the Diagonal. Came back for a new eye from the Organ Banks. I was wondering if you could tell me anything about my people. My family."

Silence. He waited a respectable length of time and asked, "The Beast?"

"The Beast does not exist," said Library immediately.

Caesar shrugged. Even after all these years Library's slow circuits were consistent. The old desk grumbled something and then its voice softened.

"Little Caesar. How you have grown! You are a bigger man now—and older. I hope you haven't neglected that body of

yours. You haven't given up the Long Run have you?"

Caesar's eyebrows rose slightly. "There wasn't much opportunity for running out on the Diagonal. But I've taken care of myself. I can still run."

"If you'd like to run before lunch you may use the refresher. There's a remote unit on the peg in there," said Library. The words were more a maternal command than an offer.

He hung his shoes and shirt on the peg and clipped the palm-sized remote unit to his belt. He walked across the playground—his bare soles tingling at each pebble and blade of grass. A sweating five-year-old returning from the course nodded gravely as he passed. The morning was mildly sunny.

He stepped out briskly, covering the first four hundred yards in record time (for him). He had kept his muscles toned up in his starship gym and they carried him well. The muscles were large—with large capillary beds to store the lactic acid and carbon dioxide they were producing. His vascular system was slow to adjust to the exertion and his pH dropped a hundredth of a point. The acidosis surprised his chemoreceptors and his pulse began to race.

"Good pace," said Library over the remote unit.

At the first mile marker he felt like a fish out of water. Gasping and dizzy, he slowed to a walk. Then, as the course turned downhill, the going became easier and he began to jog again. He waited for a second wind but none came. He hair-pinned the pine tree at the three-mile marker. Thirsty. No canteen.

"Thirty-three minutes, five seconds," announced Library.

His coronary arteries—become small in the years without endurance activity—were unable to meet the demands of his heart muscle. Straining on the return up-slope he developed chest pain. Synovial edema puckered his gait and a limp appeared as he neared the playground. His vision swam. Numbness prickled at his face and hands. Still no second wind. The neglected cardiorespiratory machinery was unable to shift into overdrive. Gasping and clutching at his aching chest, he fell across the finish line. His face was wet and pale. Saliva drooled out of the corner of his mouth.

"Seventy-four minutes, twelve seconds," said Library.

In his contortions his glassy eye fell out and rolled, moist and gritty, in the dust. Several minutes passed before feeling returned to him and he picked it up—popping it into his mouth to clean it. Spitting out the offending dirt, he blinked the prosthesis back under his left eyelid and sat up straight, breathing deeply.

"Good workout," said Library.

"Really good," he said wryly.

AT ORGAN BANKS he was ushered into the office of one of the senior parameds. After some preliminary discussion and nodding the fee was nailed down and addenda supplied.

"A Genetic Carbon Copy eye—0.711 mf. The project requires a four-year growing period. You must realize that if you decide to cancel only that part of the megafranc that hasn't been used can be returned. You are liable for all the expenses for your project."

Caesar ignored the paramed's indifferent manner and asked, "Why four years?"

The paramed glanced at his well-groomed fingernails. "Takes that long to reach the size to match your other eye. Can't use a banked eye because of the danger of rejection. Don't want any of those nasty anti-CNS antibodies running around, now—do we?"

"No. I suppose not. But how do you grow an eye? Do you take a piece of my good eye and—"

The paramed shook his head, reached into his desk for a folder. "Here. This explains our GCC process. We can't grow most adult tissue in an organ form. Only the immature cells divide well and they quickly upset any gross anatomic structures such as you'd need in an organ like the eye. The lens, cornea, retina and optic nerve—none of these structures can be cultured as such. We have to harvest the eye bud from an embryo and grow that.

"We just draw a blood sample and isolate some of your lymphocytes—a young white blood cell that divides very easily. When the lymphocytes are growing well we freeze some, grow some and remove the nuclei from some. These naked nuclei are implanted into human egg cytoplasm—eggs from which their own nuclei have been removed. The egg with your naked nucleus divides and embryonates with only your genes present—producing your GCC. We just grow it until it is large enough to harvest the transplant material we are after."

The folder Caesar was looking at showed several examples of culture tanks. One contained a liver for a post-hepatitis patient. Another a pair of lungs for a victim of beryllium poisoning. The round lymphocyte drawing with its lacy nucleus reminded him of his red ball.

"That naked nucleus carries all the genes necessary to grow an entire individual?" asked Caesar.

"That is correct."

Caesar studied the diagram of the optic nerves. They were shaped like a large X, half of each nerve crossing the midline on its way back from the retina to the geniculate bodies in the midbrain. A photomicrograph showed millions of separate nerve fibers.

He frowned. "I've done a little

work with computers and I've learned that hookups between sensors and cybernetic units are very critical. All the connections have to be exact or incoming information can't be interpreted. How can anyone match up all these separate nerve fibers?" he asked.

The paramed looked pained. "Those nerve fibers are coming from nerve cells in the retina. The hookups in organic systems aren't so critical. The visual cortex relearns how to interpret incoming signals. All we have to do is inject some geniculate RNA in your optic nerve stump. That gets most of the new axons growing down the right direction. The anastomosis is coated with what we call CNS sealer, a mixture of embryonic connective tissue—from one of your GCC embryos—and maturation hormones from pituitary and thyroid. The CNS sealer "sets" quickly and matures to adult connective tissue before the cut ends of the nerve can scar too badly."

"But my brain hasn't been able to see with my left eye for all these years. Hasn't it lost the ability permanently?"

The paramed pointed to the center of the X on the diagram. "Half of the fibers from your right eye cross over, here, at the optic chiasma. So, with just one eye you have been using both sides of your visual cortex. The new left eye will just be adding more information—reinforcing the images. You probably won't even notice the increased acuity—it'll occur so gradually. The biggest change will be the addition of your left lateral peripheral vision. You have none now—your nose is sort of in the way. But once the images balance you'll be able to learn to hold your head straight again."

Caesar had not been aware of how obvious his cock-eyed gaze was. He had a habit of carrying his head turned slightly to the left so that his right visual field was centered on what he was looking at. Two eyes would square up his posture again. He rolled up his sleeve for the venipuncture.

HE APPROACHED his scooter. The hatch opened and Jen-B's voice came over the communicator.

"All finished up on the surface?"

"I guess so. I'm coming up. Warm up something light for supper."

He strapped himself in. The light scooter arced quickly toward the orbiting starship.

"How did you make out with Academy?" he asked.

"Fine," Jen-B said. "They're well pleased with our profit margin so far. I have a promising list of new missions. When will you have to return for your GCC eye?"

"Four years."

There was a moment's pause

while the starship balanced the time requirements against the potential income of each mission. "Two parsecs is the range," she said. "We can stay here and take up people-moving. There's mining in the Tietze System. Charting in the—"

"Mining?" he interrupted. "Part of my legacy was in mining stock. Something called the Mother-Lode-Planetoid. Can you check with Library and see if there is any record that would link my legacy with the Tietze Planetoids. I've been trying to find out about my family but Library doesn't like to talk about parents."

Jen-B opened a channel to the Orphanage. "Library is only a class nine. Not too reliable. There's no cross indexing between you and Tietze. Better relax and finish your supper while I try a few more lines of questioning."

He ate from a wide-necked squeeze tube that contained spicy protein cubes in a warm broth of aromatic hydrocarbons. Finally Jen-B said: "Library is full of blocks about people—you, your parents, your condition prior to operation. But the lines of information are pretty exacting when assets are involved. Your legacy did contain that mining stock. It was a Tietze-based company. The date your legacy was set up was early in the year One Thousand ninety-nine, D.I.T. It opened at zero point, three three seven magafrancs. Information on the person opening the legacy is scanty. He was an off-world human, alive—no probated will or anything like that. I can't find his name, but he had red hair and was staying at a local address with a large number of injured miners."

"Red hair?" said Caesar enthusiastically. "He must have been my father." But he was left with more unanswered questions—why the legacy at all if the leaver were alive? Or, if no longer alive, where had he died? And why hadn't the legacy-leaver taken Caesar with him when he left? Caesar quickly ran through the list of possible reasons why a father would leave his son in an orphanage. All he could come up with was the possibility that he—Caesar—might be illegitimate. Unwanted. His own name, *Caesar*, was similar to the names of the other illegitimates he had known. They had all been given names of powerful men—planet conquerors—in the hopes that these would bring them some of the luck of their namesakes.

He frowned at Jen-B's panel. "I suppose there is no record of where he went after he left the legacy."

"Nothing connecting the legacy-leaver with any of the other memory bigs." Jen-B said. "The blocks are complete around him. But the number of miners in the rehabilitation section with him indicates a fairly large mining

accident a year or so prior. No mines on Deneb record such a disaster. Tietze is a logical place to begin our search. A redhead with zero point three megafrancs shouldn't be too hard to trace if he is linked with a large mining accident. We know the approximate date and I have a list of the securities that were put into your legacy."

Caesar hesitated for a moment. He didn't like mixing business with her personal life—might jeopardize profit. Finally he assented.

"We'll need a navigator to bring back the ore. Have one in mind?" he asked.

"There's a poet at Cyber Central. He's about three hundred years old. But he has been on the Tietze route several times and his price is right."

Caesar nodded, his mind on the legacy-leaver.

"I'll send the scooter for him," continued Jen-B.

Caesar stood in the cargo bay when Navigator was off-loaded. He was old and corroded. About the size of a human, he would weigh about 1,300 pounds down on the surface. He consisted of three units: a fuel-cell abdomen, a cybernetic thorax and a sensory head—all joined by narrow, flexible joints. Other than an extendible neck, he had no motor units. Caesar wiped a finger across his gritty chassis.

"Your skin is a mess," he said.

"Too much oxygen and water vapor down there. But don't worry about me. I'll be fine as soon as I'm out in a vacuum again," said Navigator.

Caesar glanced over his shoulder toward one of Jen-B's panels.

"Are you sure he'll be all right?"

Navigator's head—a sphere with a circumference of sensors—anthropomorphized its appearance by brightening up a pair of "eyes" and turning them on Caesar. He actually looked sheepish.

Jen-B answered, "Navigator has been debauching his energy stores and letting his body age, but it was for an understandable reason. He wanted to be near Music Box. He calculated that he had become obsolete and he planned to spend his final years with the machine he loved. Music Box and he were composing ballads—finishing tunes he had started while out listening to the stars. All he needs is a recharge and a new coat of polymer. He'll do fine."

Caesar glanced back at Navigator's downcast optic pickups. "Relax, Poet. You are a member of the crew now."

III

ON THE TRIP to Tietze Caesar tolerated a lot of weird music. Navigator and Jen-B shared the electromagnetic music from the stars. Jen-B's outer sensors

gathered in the stellar noise and fed it through Navigator's unscrambler circuits. It came out as music only a machine could appreciate.

For trading purposes Jen-B had picked up a dozen small dairy units—goat/clover/bee implants designed for low gravity dome living. The entire Tietze system was rich in heavy metals—an H type star circled by uncounted planetoids, the largest only a 0.6 G planet that had a tenuous atmosphere and a few simple local phylla. The Deneb system with its single planet was fairly metal-poor. The usual commerce consisted in exchanging Deneb genetic information for Tietze planetoids. The size of a planetoid was expressed in terms of the number of pounds that the bartering captain would weigh on its surface. A convenient size for accelerating back to Deneb would have a pull of between 0.1 and 1.0 pounds on Caesar. These units were called "donans" after the pioneer Mother-Lode engineer.

Jen-B nuzzled up to the Tietze satellite station which housed the Buyer—a humanoid robot. Quasistellar engines were anchored to the ends of the satellite's arms. Human technicians swarmed over Jen-B's cargo enthusiastically. The microcontainers of naked nuclei looked monotonous to Caesar, but the Tietze system humans understood their coded labels. In a system where the local ecology had produced nothing more complex than moss and nematodes, every flower and butterfly had to be brought across parsecs of empty space. After hundreds of years the local biology textbooks had only a two-page glossary. Even a new weed would be welcome if it looked, smelled or tasted different.

The mechanical Buyer remained aloof. "We already have a dairy animal. I can offer you a zero-point-one donan planetoid for your cargo."

"But that is a pretty large breed of cattle you're talking about. Suitable for the grazing lands on Tietze's largest planet. I'm offering you a thirty-pound milk goat that can go anywhere a man can go. It produces a couple quarts of milk a day and can be bred yearly—usually has twin births. Any dome city can raise goats on a hydroponics farm." said Caesar.

Buyer remained silent.

I'll personally stay and see that the implants get established. But I'll need 0.5 donan."

Buyer agreed immediately. Payment on delivery of established implants. It would take about a year to get them started—plant the clover, rewarm the bees and embryonate the goats. Jen-B began to cycle the goat naked nuclei into their respective eggs. Domes were selected. The clover was planted in every open place—along walks, in decorative flower boxes—on roofs. It was a pleasant sight to see

one of the citizens returning to his home—a home with half a dozen baby goats grazing on its roof. The little animals accepted the gravity of the smaller planetoids and seemed to enjoy the long leaps from roof to roof. Psychologically there were an asset—a symbol of their owners' protein independence and a break in the monotony of the scanty dome ecology.

The mechanical Buyer followed the growth curves of the new goats. Implant success hinged on successful reproduction, and the animals seemed to be approaching sexual maturity on schedule. A set of Q. engines were detached from the Buyer's satellite, tested and fueled with quarks. An inventory of 0.5 donan planetoids was prepared—each with its analysis. Caesar carried the preliminary list with him as he traveled about, watching the goats mature. When they passed one of the planetoids on the list Jen-B marked its composition, size and orbit on her chart of the Tietze system.

CAESAR noticed a little girl with some goats and thought she looked familiar. She had the same red hair and freckles that he had as a child. Her father also had some of his features.

He was checking the goat implant in a dome city on one of the outer 0.2 gravity planetoids. He spoke to the girl.

"My great-grandfather and grandfather were both killed at the mine," she said matter-of-factly. "They've closed it down now."

"Where is the mine?" asked Caesar. He had gone over this planetoid earlier when the goats had been implanted. No large mines had been in operation during the years he was interested in.

She looked through the semitransparent dome and pointed toward the horizon.

"The mine was on Fish Moon."

An oblong planetoid was barely visible—a crescent of light in the glare of the Tietze sun—a tiny thumbnail size.

He thanked her, patted a goat's knobby head and went back to his scooter.

On their trip to Fish Moon Jen-B made her observations. "Tendonan size. But it has two large fracture lines—so essentially it consists of three separate masses now. Mining complex cold—no energy. Just a robot sentinel. Better wear your *heavy* with its extra bottles—the domes appear unpressurized."

He watched Fish Moon's approach on the viewscreen. It did look a little like a fish. One of the fracture lines could be the gills and the other ran longitudinal—like a fish's lateral line. The bright reflecting surfaces and the sharp, black shadows reminded him of fins and scales. Soon he was close enough to see the domes and fields of the abandoned mine. It was

located at the junction of the two fracture lines—about where he would expect the fish's pectoral fin to be.

Jen-B moved the scooter to the unloading bay.

"Sentinel says he is alone—a class X or XI on our system intelligence grade. I'm sending a servomech, Tapper, along with you. You'll probably have to probe the mine's old memory circuits yourself. Sentinel doesn't have the power."

Caesar climbed into the scooter and smiled at Tapper's little barrel shape—six stubby legs, two small optic pickups, a V antenna in front and a stout carrying handle down his back. He was a ten-gallon size and reminded Caesar of a giant ladybug. Tapper wrapped his six stubby legs around the arm rest of Caesar's couch and waited.

While Tapper worked in the cold dark conduits of the mine's memory components, Caesar casually picked up several chips and fed them into the Scooter's analysis port. The analysis of each flickered across scooter's screen as it was relayed to Jen-B. The chips were spat out and dropped slowly to the ground. They were unchanged, except for the three pin-sized, burn-holes of the analyzer.

"We are in luck," said Tapper over the communicator. "This is the standard *Hagan* memory pattern. If it is intact I'll be back into the disaster data in a few minutes."

Caesar picked up another handful of chips. These had been in contact with each other during the twenty-odd years of hard vacuum. Their molecules had migrated across the contact interface—fusing them into one crystallized mass. The first sample of chips—lying separate on the polymere floor—had not fused to anything. Outside the dome the entire planetoid surface consisted of one fused mass—soft dust and loose gravel had settled and crystallized into the harsh surface of an industrial grinding wheel.

"Found your legacy-leaver," announced Tapper. "Portfolio matches. He was one of the foremen—injured badly in the explosion. Fault lines appeared in Fish Moon—vacuum explosions, high oxygen flash fires and tunnel collapse. His name—Walter S.J. Varley—does not match any of the data we have from Deneb. But now that we have his name we should be able to learn more back there. He left for Deneb thirty-nine years ago."

Caesar said nothing.

The goats were bred successfully. As the fetuses grew in the uteri the mechanical Buyer ordered Q. engine installation on the planetoid Caesar had selected. Jen-B assigned Tapper and Navigator to observe the construction.

"THE goats are coming. The goats are coming," shouted the little red-haired girl. Her father got up from his coffee-and-cake and went up the ladder to the goat shed on the roof. When the message arrived Caesar hurried to assist with the delivery.

"Not much to worry about, Caesar," said Jen-B. "The babies are small and the mother's pelvis is more than adequate. About the only thing we could do is raise the atmospheric oxygen to protect the second twin. When there are two like this the cord and placenta of the second one are subject to occasional damage during the delivery of the first."

They arrived in time to witness the birth of the second baby goat. Its wet, boney body came out fast in a gush of cloudy fluids. The little girl's father kneeled in the dried clover bedding and deftly plucked the membranes from the heads of the newborns.

"Implant's a success," said Jen B.

The girl's father—tall and red-headed like Caesar—invited him in for a glass of celebration. The drink was white and bubbly and had a bitter, alcoholic sting. Caesar was grateful that it was served in very small glasses.

The little girl's mother—also a redhead—was breast-feeding two tiny infants. They were about eight or nine pounds in size—one a freckled redhead, the other a dark, olive-skinned baby with coal black hair. When he was back in his scooter, arcing up towards Jen-B Caesar commented on the two different genetic appearances of the human children.

"A dividend from our implant-planetoid-exchange. One of the implant vials contained a broad spectrum of human naked nuclei—the rainbow mix." said Jen-B. "I cycled several through embryogenesis to correlate with the human pregnancy so they'd have milk."

Caesar looked puzzled. "What have humans to do with our dairy implants?"

"Goatherds," said Jen-B simply.

Well, thought Caesar, the Tietze System could certainly use a little broadening of its human genetic base.

JEN-B orbited the bartered planetoid about two diameters out. The Q. engines were installed and Navigator had tied himself into the communications net. Caesar stood by, carrying Tapper by his dorsal handle.

"Ready?" asked Navigator.

"Try a hundredth of a gravity," suggested Caesar.

The vibration of the engines—transmitted through about a hundred miles of ore—passed up through his feet to his cranial nerve. He "heard" their quasistellar fires. He felt the center of grav-

ity of the planetoid shift slightly aft.

Navigator adjusted the engine's fields—fondling the little captive pieces of the sun. Caesar leaned against the scooter and glanced nervously up at Jen-B's orbiting hull.

"Feels like the center of gravity is moving back toward the engines," he said.

"We're moving," said Navigator. "The vectors of acceleration are the same—gravity or engine. You're feeling the resultant force."

"What happens when the center of gravity moves above the surface?" he asked.

"That's when we find out if we've bought ourselves a nugget or a pile of rocks," said Navigator casually.

Caesar climbed into his scooter. "Well, good luck. The stockholders will be happy to see you. Have a nice trip."

Navigator did have a nice trip. His sensors listened for music in the planetoid's vibrations and the electromagnetic spectrum of the background stars. Finding a tune everywhere, he sang along—composing new ballads.

Ballads he would sing to Music Box when he returned to Deneb.

IV

CAESAR lugged Tapper's bulk into the Orphanage and set him on Library's desk.

"I'm going to check in at the Clinic. You two see if you can get along until I return," he said.

Tapper shifted his weight on his little feet and waved his antennae. Library felt a flush of warmth as Tapper's powerful sympathy fields caressed old memory cores.

"What manner of a machine is this?" asked Library.

"I am Tapper—a remote unit of Jen-B—a class VI."

Then, after a pause Tapper turned to Caesar: "You go ahead and see about your GCC eye. Everything is fine here."

THE paramed probed his socket with a gloved finger.

"Now look up. That's fine."

Caesar felt the nubbin of muscle flex and twitch under the examining finger.

"Good ocular muscle tone. Moving that prosthesis around has been good exercise. These stumps are well developed," said the paramed. He cupped the EEG pickup over the back of his head and probed the eye socket with the stimulator probe. "Patent nerve. Visual cortex okay."

He snapped off his glove while Caesar blinked back the glassy prosthesis.

"Be ready for surgery in two days?" asked the paramed.

Caesar shifted in his chair. He was careful not to look at any of the little display tanks—afraid

he'd see his new eye peeking at him.

"Now don't worry about the pain," comforted the paramed. "You'll be sound asleep when they peel out the old scar. There are a dozen or so vessels to hook up on the back of the eye ball. That takes some fine stitching under a microscope. We have an oriental technician that does a beautiful job at that. The nerve hookup is easy with the quick setting CNS sealer. "Your eyes will be taped for a few weeks. But otherwise there won't be much inconvenience. The postoperative discomfort can be covered satisfactorily with a few All-Purpose Capsules each day."

Caesar nodded and started to leave.

"Here, don't forget your seeing-eye cap," said the paramed. He handed Caesar a thin skullcap with a pair of optic pickups on the front and a prickly layer of skin electrodes on the inside. He tried it on.

"Feels like a pillow full of nails," he said.

The paramed touched one of the optic pickups. "You've been used to seeing with your right eye. I'll turn off the left pickup. Now shut your eye and tell me what you see."

"Just blackness—nothing. Oh, there is some light. Colored. Looks like a lot of colored ink blots."

"Fine. The impulses are getting through. Open your eye to give your cortex a clue to what you are looking at. Now close it again."

Caesar thought he saw a solid square. Then it became a square hole in a solid wall. He opened his eye a few more times and soon his cortex was correctly interpreting lights from shadows through the cap's pickup.

The paramed tuned the fine adjustment. Secondary images began to demarcate—furniture in the room was clear enough to be avoided if he wanted to try walking with the cap. But he couldn't tell what was on the desk and he couldn't recognize the humanoid blob that was the paramed.

"This is great. How well will I be able to see with this thing?" asked Caesar.

"Not much better than that. Enough to find the refresher and the food tray. There are only about a hundred electrodes in this model—and they just rest on top of the scalp. Can't focus well on that part of the visual cortex that is folded in between the two halves of your occipital lobes. We have produced twenty/eighty vision with the ten thousand electrode model, but they were sewn into the dural membranes under the skull."

Caesar took off the cap. "Fine. I'll practice with this thing at night. See you in two days."

"Right."

He found Tapper still resting on Library's desk.

"Learn anything?" he asked.

Tapper shifted his barrel shape

around and focused on Caesar. "Not much." he answered. "Library is a class IX. He's old and has been using a non-Hagan language for storage. I thought there were blocks around you and the legacy-leaver—so did Jen-B—but the circuits are clean. No memory blocks. Cross indexing was just neglected in your case. You suddenly appear in the memory banks on the date of your enucleation—nothing from your past is entered. Your legacy is perfectly recorded—only your legacy-leaver is vague. The name—Walter S.J. Varley—means nothing to Library. It is odd that these things would go unrecorded."

"Caesar. Did you find your legacy-leaver?" asked Library.

"I think so, Library. I traced the legacy itself back to the Tietze System. Apparently the legacy-leaver was a man much like myself but a miner—injured. He came here to Deneb for rehabilitation. He may have been married on his home planetoid, but he didn't bring a wife to Deneb."

"None of them brought wives," said Tapper.

Library filed that information away. "Information about parents I do not record as long as it conforms to my basic norms."

"What norms?" asked Caesar.

"Good genes."

Caesar reviewed what he knew. The legacy-leaver was a foreman. Somatic similarities suggested that he could be Caesar's father. But many of the other workers from Tietze were related. Any could have fathered him. If his mother was a local Deneb girl, the legacy might well have been left to cover for the abandoned child of any of the Tietze workers. The foreman might have been acting in his company's name rather than his own family name. Well, either way the conclusion was the same. Caesar was an unwanted child who had been left to "go it alone." Library had raised him well, he decided.

Caesar placed his right hand on Tapper's dorsal handle and began to lift. Then, almost as an afterthought, he replaced the cybernetic barrel on the desk. It was a sunny day.

"Might as well take a Long Run while I'm here," he said.

"Take it easy. The last time you tried that you had some ischemic S-T depression," said Tapper, reflecting Jen-B's concern. Her sensors, wired into his body, picked up physiological parameters and telemetered them back. His cardiogram consisted of an electrical tracing with the waves labeled P,Q,R,S and T. Depolarization of the upper chambers of the heart caused the P wave. The QRS complex was the result of depolarization of the large ventricular muscles that pump the blood. The flat segment between S and T waves reflected lack of oxygen. The

heart sags when the myocardium gets ischemic. If the ischemia is too severe the muscle can die. This raises the S-T segment sharply. Jen-B worried as Caesar removed his shoes.

Caesar glanced up the first leg of the course. Four years was a long time. Just the sight of the slope tired him.

"Pulse one-forty and he hasn't even started," said Tapper.

He started jogging slowly. One minute. Two. He still felt okay. He stretched out his pace a little more briskly.

"S-T down, zero point one mv—ischemia," said Tapper.

Caesar felt a slight squeeze in his chest. He slowed to a walk.

"Walking now. S-T down zero point two mv," said Tapper.

"He'll start running again. He never stops on the course," said Library. Tapper shifted around and focused on the open window. He couldn't see the course from there. Jen-B watched the cardiogram. The rate was an irregular 180 beats per minute. Too fast. And there were occasional extra beats—isolated P waves and QRS complexes. The myocardium was beginning to get irritated—probably a rising adrenalin level.

The walking dropped his pulse rate under 150 and he topped the hill. On the down slope he started running again. Muscles and joints warmed up.

"S-T segment down zero point twenty-five mv now," said Tapper.

Library frowned at the little barrel. "What has he been doing the last four years? He is in worse condition now than the last time he tried to run the course. He has no endurance at all."

"On the starship he pressed the equivalent of his own weight each day," said Tapper.

"That's no good for endurance. Why he—" began Library.

"Heart block. Heart block!" shouted Tapper. The cardiogram showed an atrial P wave rate of about 200/min and a ventricular QRS rate of 90/min. The upper and lower chambers were beating separately. Jen-B sent the scooter from its parking place to the Long Run course. It swooped down and landed across the trail in front of Caesar.

He was standing, wet and pale, in the middle of the trail near the three-mile pine tree. He had a puzzled expression on his face and he was scratching his jaw.

"Toothache," he said. He didn't seem to be able to see the scooter. He suddenly felt profoundly weak. He lay down slowly. His face and hands went numb and the peripheral visual field darkened. He coughed up some pink foam and passed out.

"MYOCARDIAL infarct. Got the conducting fibers," said the Healer.

Caesar opened his eyes. The

chest pain was still there and he felt short of breath. He coughed foam. But he also felt wonderful. Drugs.

"What does this mean?" he asked weakly.

The Healer smiled. "Awake now—are we? That's just fine. You've just had a three gam infarct. A little bit of heart muscle died. The vessel that supplied it got plugged up. Atherosclerosis, probably."

"How serious is it?"

"Not too bad. It is a small one. But it did get the conducting fibers. Your atrial and ventricular contractions are not coordinated. That should clear up in a couple of weeks." said the Healer.

"If it doesn't?"

"We have a Genetic Carbon Copy heart we can put in." said the Healer.

"Eye—a GCC eye. That's what I'm having. Not a heart," said Caesar.

"An eye and a heart too—if you need it," said the Healer. "The Organ Banks checked with us yesterday. They have just about anything you can possibly need—all GCC."

Caesar was puzzled. "But all I paid for was the eye—"

The Healer patted him on the shoulder. "You rest now. You've already been here three days. I've cut down your sedatives. Tomorrow you'll be up in the chair. And—oh yes. Don't worry about the GCC cost. If you use the heart and the eye they'll refund about zero point twenty-eight mf."

Caesar slept. He dreamed of a little red-headed boy chasing a ball. Chasing and catching the ball. The boy had two eyes. Two eyes and a heart.

The next morning Tapper was on his bedside table when he awoke. "How is the wandering pacemaker of three-o-nine?"

Caesar puffed up his pillow and stared at Tapper.

"Does this mean I'll loose Jen-B?" he asked.

Tapper hesitated before answering. "Up to now the answer to that is—not yet. The Academy went through the list of their recent graduates last night. No one matched Jen-B as well as you—in your present condition. If you improve they expect you to continue to operate at a profit. If you don't—"

He left the obvious unsaid. Dead or a cripple. It amounted to the same thing. He'd be left here and Jen-B would be matched with a younger and healthier human.

The Healer came in with Library's remote unit—the three-inch disc. He fastened it to Caesar's pajamas.

"Wear this. When it says walk—you walk. If it says lie down—you lie down. Today you walk to your chair and sit there for fifteen minutes. Do that twice in the morning and twice in the after noon."

Caesar sat up and hung his feet over the side of the bed. Then he got up easily and walked to his chair.

"My heart. The chest pain is gone."

"Don't let that fool you. It was a three-gram infarct. Right on the conducting bundle. Heart block is still present. Just do what you're told."

"About my GCC eye. Why would a GCC heart be available along with it—and at a lower cost?"

Healer shrugged. "I don't know too much about these genetic projects. Different specialty. But their prices do reflect the actual costs. Must be cheaper to grow the eye with a heart than without it."

Caesar noticed that the heart refund was ominously close to the size of his own legacy. He tried to recall what the paramed had said when he had been explaining the Genetic Carbon Copying process —something like growing the embryo until it is large enough to *harvest the transplant*. How large? Four years? An icy sensation closed on his chest. He shuddered.

"Tapper?" he asked apprehensively. "Do you have a complete description of the legacy-leaver's injuries? Was his left eye—"

"Missing?" said Tapper. "Yes. Penetrating injury during the explosion. His eye was removed at the Tietze Station prior to his coming here."

Then Caesar realized exactly what he was.

"Cardiac arrest! Cardiac arrest!" shouted Tapper. Caesar's cardiogram ran flat—isoelectric with ineffectual haphazard fibrillation. An electric shock restarted the heartbeat twice but it stopped again. He heard the sounds of hurrying footsteps in the outer hall. Then he heard nothing.

CAESAR became aware of blackness. He was in bed—flat, soft—no toys. Face bandaged. Eye? He tried moving his right eye and felt an ache in the left socket. The left eyelid was filled out with something soft and warm—lighter than his prosthesis. Lighter and tender. The GCC transplant? When he tried to take a deep breath to speak, all he could produce was a squeak. Left chest pain limited his inspiration. It was not the squeezing, substernal pain of myocardial infarct. It was different—more localized to the ribs and muscles. Cautiously he palpated his left chest—another bandage.

"Oh, no—" he mumbled.

"Are you awake?" asked Tapper's tinny voice.

Caesar caught himself before he asked what happened. He knew. His own heart must have stopped and his GCC heart was put into his chest. The GCC eye too. Damn efficient, he thought cynically. His

own body had been repaired with antigenically perfect organs—perfect because they had come from his Genetic Carbon Copy. Only—he knew that somewhere a little four-year-old GCC was without those organs today. His naked nucleus had grown into a child—just as he had when The Beast had needed a new eye. The difference this time was that Caesar had needed a heart too. This would leave the four-year-old nonviable. No need for a legacy. Caesar would be getting a refund.

Jen-B was shocked by the level of depression that Caesar's read-outs reflected. She prodded Tapper.

"Hi, there," shouted Tapper cheerily. "Your seeing-eye-cap is right here beside me. Try it on. Take a look outside. It is a nice sunny day. You have been sleeping for almost two days."

Nothing. Schizoid encephalogram pattern. Jen-B almost left her orbit. Was she losing her human? Tapper felt her nagging commands.

Days turned to weeks.

Nothing.

"Have a drink," sang Tapper. He danced on his little legs to shake the table. The table moved and the ice rattled invitingly in the glass. Caesar stirred. Exploring the table top he found his cap and set it on his head. Spiny electrodes tickled his scalp, producing a Rorschach of colored amorphous blobs to appear in his visual cortex. The bandage prevented some of the electrodes from reaching his skin. He pressed the cap down firmly and an image appeared for a moment. He saw Tapper's welcome barrel shape on his bedside table. There was also a tall object—the drink. He reached for it. His encephalogram ran smoothly as his fingers closed on the cold, moist cylinder.

The cap shifted and the room disappeared. He pressed it down again and the wall came into focus. The window was bright. A blob moved past the window—a small round blob. A larger blob followed.

He turned away.

"Bandages come off today," a voice said curtly. "Still not talking? Well, you can't fool us, Caesar. We can see from your brain waves that there is nothing wrong—except a bad case of stubbornness." The bandages were unwound. "When you feel like it you can open your eyes any time."

Caesar knew what he would see—two well-matched eyes—wet eyes—living eyes. He glanced dejectedly into the mirror held by the paramed. He took a moment to focus—but there they were—two eyes.

He said nothing. He glanced sadly at his chest. The long thin incision was healing well. The cross-marks left by the sutures were hardly visible.

"Oh don't worry about your heart. We fixed that too," said the paramed proudly.

Caesar winced

"Got those coronaries pretty well reamed out. Implanted two extra arteries into the heart muscle, too—your mammary arteries are now going to help your heart muscle recover—but you'll have to do a lot—"

Caesar interrupted the paramed's ramblings. "No heart transplant?"

"I guess not. You didn't need it. Your infarct was pretty small and— Say, you're talking. Glad to hear you."

The paramed gathered up his dressings tray and left.

Caesar smiled for a moment. If he still had his own heart—then his GCC was probably still alive. But without an eye. Tapper hummed placidly. He couldn't blame Jen-B or Library for allowing the GCC transplant. Business ethics. The purpose for the GCC'c existence was to supply autotransplant tissues. To everyone in Organ Banks the GCC projects probably had no human rights until they fulfilled the business ethic. Then, if viable, they became human beings—orphans. Naked nuclei with a legacy.

Naturally Library had no record of his childhood prior to enucleation—Little Caesar's existence began on the day he lost his eye. On that day he paid off his debt—the price for existence—and "went it alone."

HEALER saw him a few more times—prescribed a program of endurance exercises on a bedside bicycle-ergometer. Caesar pedaled against calibrated increases in resistance until he could maintain an oxygen consumption of 400 ml/min. He remained sullen and refused to look at the window. The sounds of children playing wore him down.

"Take me back up to Jen-B," he asked.

Tapper brightened. "All taken care of. As soon as you're ready. Healer has filed duplicate orders with us. You can convalesce just as well in space."

Better, thought Caesar. As he walked to scooter he stole a glance at the playground and saw himself. Same red hair, freckles—and the ball. The left eye patch and the disobedient ball. Tears filled both of Caesar's eyes.

"Anywhere special you want to go? asked Jen-B cheerily.

Caesar settled back in his couch and closed his eyes.

"Let's go as far away as we can—try for duty-out the Orion Arm," he said.

He knew he was leaving his four-year-old Genetic Carbon Copy behind—in the capable hands of Library.

Caesar had become the new Beast of 309. ●

THE MAN UNDERNEATH

The Great Zambesi was pure gold underneath—on the outside he was rotten!

R.A. LAFFERTY

CHARLES CHARTEL was not the most pleasant man in the world, and as the Great Zambesi he was not the greatest magician. But he was a smart man and a good magician. He had the magnetism of a faith healer, the spirit and appearance of a rooster and a deadly seriousness. He had the patter and the poise and he had learned all that was learnable.

Nor was he a mere pigeon-passer and card-caller. He had inherited, built up, bought and assembled as full a repertoire as any Magic Man in the business.

And, as each must have, he had his specialty: a simple and sound disappearing act. It was nothing really startling; he seemed to underplay it. But it was puzzling and it remained a puzzle even to those in the trade. This one prime trick equated him with the Real Masters who in general technique were a little out of his class. Actually, in the ultimate variation of it, it was the *greatest* trick.

He put Veronica into a box. And when he opened the box again she was gone. That is all there was to it. The same thing had been performed by dozens of others in many variations.

But Charles (the Great Zambesi) Chartel did not use any of those

variations; not, certainly, the trap door—for he had once performed the trick in a wire mesh twenty feet in the air. Besides, he was a cut above the trap-door men.

After showing the empty box he would always take it apart board by board, and pass the boards around for all to handle. He would then assemble it once more into a box, clamp down the cover, unclamp it again, open it, and Veronica would get out of the box.

The Great Boffo swore that the girl never stepped into the box at all. The Great Buffo, however, could not duplicate the trick. Nor could the Great Thaumaturgos, nor the Great Zebdo.

All of them could make girls disappear from boxes, of course, and could do it in more showy fashion. But, though it was the same thing to the audiences, it was not the same thing to themselves. Their tricks were known to each other and were obvious to any magic man. The special trick of Zambesi-Chartel was not understood and this gave him stature. The only men in the world who do not secretly believe in magic are the magicians, but there was something about the doings of the Great Zambesi that sowed doubt in them. The Great Vespo, indeed, claimed that he knew how it was done. But Vespo, though brillant, was an old man and was given to extravagant claims.

The explanation that Charles (the Great Zambesi) Chartel gave to his audiences will not be given here. Should we repeat it, we would not be believed; we would be laughed at—and we are sensitive. We have not the magnetism of Zambesi to carry off such an outlandish claim as his even though it should be true—and it was. (Actually he said that he sent Veronica down into the Ocean and that he called her back again from that Ocean.)

However, this isn't about the disappearance of Veronica; it is about a matter quite the opposite. And the opposite of the disappearance of Veronica was the appearance of someone who differed from her as much as possible.

THIS came about at the Tri-State Fair when the New Arena was quite new. The crowd was spirited and the Great Zambesi was in full form. The lighting was perfect and Veronica shone like a jewel set in gold as she stepped into the box that was set up on blocks, clear of the stage. Zambesi closed the box and the crowd had the true feeling of magic about to happen.

And then, with perfect timing, Zambesi-Chartel threw back the front cover as to reveal the box—empty.

We will be hornswitched if that box was empty!

But what rolled out of the box

was not Veronica. It was the most woebegone scarecrow of a clown ever seen, the saddest looking man who ever stumbled over his own two feet.

"Holy hamadryads, cramoise, where did you come from?" Zambesi-Chartel breathed without understanding his own words.

The man out of the box was a hobo from a hundred years ago. He wept and wiped his nose with his hand. He had trouble with falling pants and broken shoes and a coat whose sleeve avoided arm. The little clown was good and there was real pathos in his silent humor.

"You've got to get out of here, cnaufer," Chartel hissed at the little man again and again. "Who are you and how did you get here? Off with you now, cathexis, you're fouling up the act." But the little man avoided Chartel who would have killed him in all sincerity.

Finally Chartel in his despair closed the box loudly, then opened it again and brought Veronica out of it. But that didn't get rid of the little tramp. He was still cavorting about the stage and he was good. Listen, he was dressed in old black pants and a torn undershirt and one suspender and he walked about the stage. Then he had on a red sweater and a burglar's cap and black glasses. He still walked about the stage and suddenly he was splendid in evening clothes and monocle. Nobody had done that before.

He became Joe College; he became the man in the charcoal-tan suit; he became an old rowdy-dow on the loose with pearl-gray vest and yellow gloves. Then he became a hobo again—but of a different and worse vesture than before.

"Go away, cistugurium," Veronica whispered angrily, "please go away. You're not supposed to be in the act. Who are you anyhow?"

Nobody else had ever completely changed his garb six times in a minute and a half while hobbling about the stage with his hands in his pockets. Nobody else transmuted his shoes from brown to black as he walked in them. The expression of the little man was pathetic and many eyes misted as they watched him.

Then, before the act had begun to drag, the little man wobbled over and fell flat on his face in the box. Zambesi-Chartel closed it and stood poised over it in an intensity of fear and hope. Then he opened the box again. The little man was gone.

Zambesi-Chartel took the box apart board by board and he left it apart. Well, it had been a good act, with an added element. But Charles (the Great Zambesi) Chartel didn't know how he had done it this time—or if he was the one who did it. The trick had always been to make Veronica disappear and appear; there sure

hadn't been any little clown in the act before.

"Damn that cressanges anyhow," Chartel grumbled. He was puzzled. He knew that little man—and yet he didn't.

LATER that night at the Pepperpot some of the people ate and talked. There were Chartel himself and Veronica; there was Captain Carter who had the trained bears; there were the three Lemon sisters, Dolly, Molly, and Polly. Then another one was with them— for the little man was sitting there and sniffling. He hadn't been there before and he hadn't come in.

"Shall I order for you, claud?" Molly Lemon asked solicitously.

But a filled plate was already there and the little man began to eat. He grinned and he grimaced. He was wearing horn-rim glasses and then he was wearing pince-nez. He had a grin that came shyly as though he were trying it out for the first time.

"clarence is so cute," said Dolly Lemon. "We will adopt him into our act if Chartel doesn't want him."

There was an empty five-cigar carton on the table. The little man picked it up and it was full. Well, Chartel could duplicate that; probably you could yourself, but it would take prop and preparation. The little man pulled a stogie from the carton, puffed on it and it was lit. This also could be done; there are few tricks that cannot be duplicated.

"If you are joining the act, cletus, and it seems as though you are," said Chartel wondering, "you will have to clean up a little."

"Must I really?" asked curt but he obliged at once. He had become as immaculate a dandy as anyone ever saw. "Captain Carter," he said, "I see from your pocket bulge that you are a drinking man. I ask you to share it with us."

"It's empty an hour since," Captain Carter muttered sadly.

"It wasn't always empty," said cylix, the little man. "Let me see if I can restore it."

"The last time a magician filled an empty whisky bottle for me—and it was none other than old Zambesi-Chartel here—the stuff was not potable. It was the most horrendous rock dew ever distilled."

"This will be potable," said celiter—and the bottle filled.

Its content was gloriously potable. It put new life into the party and all of them, except Chartel-Zambesi, had a wonderful time. And if you don't think you can have fun with a reanimated bottle of whisky and Veronica and the three Lemon sisters you must have a different and more staid definition of fun.

"BUT all good things must end," said Captain Carter

when the small hours were half grown.

"All good things do *not* have to end," said cajetan, the little man, who had been enjoying himself on Polly Lemon's lap. "The world shriveled when your thought was first put into words. Good things can go on forever, except that—now and then—they must be temporarily adjourned. As long as we understand that partings are only temporary."

"Oh, we understand that, cuiller," said the three Lemon sisters. So they temporarily adjourned the party.

But later—and this was after the sun itself was up—Chartel and cyprian were finally alone.

"We will have to have an explanation," said Chartel. "Who are you?"

"You have no idea, Charles? Did you not take me out of the box? I thought you would know. Did you not call me up?"

"I doubt I did. Do not try to hoax an old hoaxer. Where did you come from that first time? The stage was not trapped and you were not intruded with my knowledge."

"Was I not? You told the audience how it was done. You said you called me up out of the Ocean."

"That is my patter—but it doesn't apply to you. Dammit, ching-chi, where'd you get the Chinese robes and grow that little beard so fast? And how do you make them both change colors so neat? No, chawan, I never called any such fish as you out of the Ocean."

"In that case I will leave, since I am here through a misunderstanding."

"Stay a bit, cyfaill. In my patter that is the way I make the girl disappear. How could it make you appear?"

"Charles, I've heard you explain the principle dozens of times. I was not in the box. But in a little while I would be in the box. So we adjust the box to a near moment in the future and I am in the box."

"There's a lacuna in your logic, clunis," Chartel said. "Hey, how can you turn into a Hottentot so easily? And not into a real Hottentot either, coya—but into what I would call an old burlesque-stage idea of a Hottentot."

"You always did have a good imagination, Charles," said chabiari. He took up an empty glass, shook it, and it was filled again.

"You're my master there, cosmos," said Chartel. "I couldn't duplicate that without props and you've done it three times. How?"

"By our own theory that we worked out so long ago, Charles. I shift it only a little in time and it is done. Anything that has once been full can be filled again by taking it back to the time of its plenitude."

"chester, you have a patter that

won't quit. But, if it worked—the idea would be a good one."

"It does work, Charles. I thought we knew that. We have used it so long."

"You talk and talk, collard," said Chartel. "But I still do not know how you can change your whole appearance so easily and often."

"Why, Charles, we are protean," said coilon. "That is the sort of man we are."

IT WAS later the same day that Finnerty, the manager of the show, spoke to Chartel about the little man.

"Your brother from the old country has put new life into the act," he said. "Keep him in it. We haven't mentioned money—and I am seldom the one to bring up the subject—but we can settle on a figure. Will it be payable to him or to you?"

"It will be payable to me," said Charles (the Great Zambesi) Chartel. Confused he was, but he always knew the top and bottom side of a dollar. Finnerty and Chartel settled on a figure.

"YOU have been taken for my brother from the old country," Chartel told colin a bit later, "and I can see why. I wondered whom you reminded me of. Oh, stop turning into a rooster! If you were shaved and combed—say, that *was* quick, contumace! The resemblance would be, is, even closer. You do look like me; you are an extremely handsome man. But I did not know that I had a brother, compuesto, and I do not know what country the old country is—since I was born on Elm Street in Springfield."

"Perhaps 'brother' is a euphemism for something even closer, Charles; and the 'old country' may have a special meaning for us. Is it not the name for what is on the other side of your 'Ocean'?"

"columkill, you are as phony as —well, metaphor fails me—you are as phony as myself," said Charles Chartel.

Sometimes the little man was frightening in his wild actions. There wasn't a mean bone in him, and he was almost universally liked. But he did act on impulse.

For him, to think was to act. It was good that everybody liked him; if they hadn't they'd have hanged him high.

And always he would multiply things. Chartel begged for his secret.

"We could be rich, cogsworth, really rich," Chartel would plead.

"But we are already rich, Charles. Nobody has ever had such a rich and perfected personality as we have. You still do not appreciate the greatness of our trick, Charles, though we thought about it for years before we were able to do it. It's the noblest illusion of them all. Now

we are citizens of an abounding world and everything in it is ours. That is to be rich."

"consuelo, you are a bleeding doctrinaire. I did not ask for a lecture. I only ask that you show me how to make a hundred dollars grow where one grew before. I say that is to be rich."

"I've shown you a hundred times, Charles, and you look for more than is in it. You take a thin old wallet that once new fatness. You restore it to its old state, empty it and restore it again, and so you accumulate. But why do you want money?"

"It is just that I have a passion for collecting it, courlis."

"Collecting we can understand, but the true collector will have no desire for duplicates. Understandably we might want a bill of each size—a one, a five, a ten, a fifty,— but we avoid that which once we prized—the ten-thousand dollar bill. The avid people have spoiled it for us. But you have not the true collectors' spirit, Charles."

"I have the true money-collectors' spirit, clendon. Why cannot I duplicate your feats in this?"

"The only reason I can figure, Charles, is that you're just too duck-knuckled dumb— and it hurts me to say that about one of ourselves."

BUT Zambesi-Chartel got a new set of ideas when he saw the trick that cormorant did with an old hat. It was at a rummage sale at which charleroi looked in out of curiosity— he was curious about everything.

"What a pixie must have worn this!" he exclaimed. "What a pixie!"

c held the hat in his hands. And then he held the head in his hands. It was something like a pixie head and it was attached to the body of a young lady. cisailles kissed the young lady uncommonly about the temporal regions and pressed her to his sternum—for to him impulse was the same as action. And she squealed.

"Not that I mind—but you *did* startle me," she chimed. "Who are you? Who, may I ask, am I? And how in pigeon-toed perdition did I get here?"

"You are a pixie, young lady," said clough, "and as such you are likely to turn up anywhere. I had your hat, so what more natural than that I should call you up to fill it."

"I am only a part-time pixie, cartier, but I am a full-time housewife. Supper will burn. How do I get back?"

"You already are," said callimachus. And she was. Or at least she was no longer there.

And that was the beginning of the trouble; not for c, not for the young pixie lady, but it was the beginning of the trouble for Charles (Great Zambesi) Chartel.

Charles knew how it was done now. One cannot continue doing a basic trick in the presence of such a sharpy as Charles Chartel without his learning it. And once he had learned how it was done there was no stopping him.

Charles Chartel was not a bad man underneath, but on the surface he was a rotter. The natural complement of healthy greed that is in every man began to burgeon unnaturally in him. The hard core of meanness spread through his whole being. The arrogance of the rooster became that of the tyrant and envy and revenge burned in him with sulphurous fire.

Chartel now had the key to total wealth, a key that would not only unlock all doors for him, but lock them against others. He set out to get control of the show. To do this he had to break Finnerty, the owner-manager, and buy him out after breaking him.

Business had been good and every night Finnerty had a full cash box. But before a thing is full, it is half full. And before that, it is a quarter full. Every night, just as Finnerty went to count the take, Zambesi-Chartel would play a trick on that box. And it would be only a quarter full. That was not enough to cover expenses.

Finnerty had never been a saving man. He had always trod the narrow green edge between solvency and disaster. And in two weeks he was broke.

Finnerty sold the show and the bookings to Chartel for ten thousand dollars. It made a nice wad in his pocket when he walked away from the show that was no longer his.

But the meanness was running like a tide in Chartel and he wouldn't let it go at that. He emptied the wallet of Finnerty again, taking it back ten minutes in time. Finnerty felt a certain lightness, and he knew what it was. But he kept on walking.

"It's lucky he left me with my pants," said Finn, "if he has. I'm afraid to look down."

A CLOUD came over the happy little family that was the show. Veronica felt herself abused and it wasn't imagination. The three Lemon sisters shivered to the chill of a harsh master. So did Carucchi the singer, and Captain Carter and his bears. And c, the little man who was the unwitting cause of it all, took to staying out of the way of the rampaging Chartel.

For Zambesi-Chartel was now avid for praise, for money, for all manner of meanness. He accumulated coin by every variation of the new trick he had learned. He robbed by it, he burgled the easy way. It is an awful and sickening thing to see a good man grow rich and respected.

"But underneath he isn't a bad man at all," Veronica moaned. "Really he isn't."

"No underneath he is a fine man," said c, the little man of impulse. "Who should know better than I?"

"Why, what do you mean, chadwick dear?" Veronica asked him.

"The same as you. Charles is only bad on the surface. Underneath he's a fine fellow."

WELL, that may have been. But on the surface, Zambesi-Chartel sure did get rough. He demeaned the dignity of his fellow humans and made them eat dirt by the ton. He went on adrenalin drunks and thrived on the hatred in his own bloodstream. He became a martinet, a propagandist for the Hoop act. He registered Democrat. He switched from perfectos to panatelas and from honest whisky sours to perfidious martinis. He developed a snigger and horselaugh that wilted pigweeds.

"Oh, chiot," said Veronica, "we must do something to save him from himself. We are all involved with him."

"Who should know better than I?" conchylatus asked sadly.

Chartel began to drink tea. He started to call a napkin a serviette and to omit every single syllable in "extraordinary." He switched allegiance from the noble National League to the sniveling American. He defrauded his laborers of their wages, he used scent, he ate vegetarian lunches, he read Walter Lippmann posthumously, he switched from Gumbo Hair Oil to Brilliantine. Once a character begins to deteriorate it goes all the way and in every detail.

Chartel had the Green Sickness, the inordinate love of money. He obtained the stuff, first by all means fair and foul, then by foul means only. But obtain it he did and it made a sniveling devil out of him.

"But the man underneath isn't bad at all," Veronica insisted.

"Who should know better than I?" caoine said.

The Grand Canyon began with a prairie dog burrow and once it was started there was no stopping it. The downfall of Zambesi-Chartel began over a nickle and then the whole apparatus came down: his wealth, real and phantom—his reputation—the whole blamed complex of the man.

It started with a fist fight he had with a blind newsdealer over a nickel. It ended with Chartel in jail, indicted, despised, shamed, despondent. Moreover, public feeling was strongly against him.

Chartel was up on more than twenty counts of theft and pilfering and the nickel stolen from the blind man was by no means the least of them. He was up on a dozen counts of wage fraud. He was charged with multiplex pickpocketing-'by device not understood'. They had him on faked bill of sale, dishonest conveyance,

simple and compounded larceny, possession of stolen goods, barratry.

"Looks like we have you on everything but chicken-stealing," the judge said at the hearing.

"We have him on that, too," said the bailiff. "Five counts of it."

"You would gag a gannet and make a buzzard belch," said the judge. "I'd crop your ears if that law still obtained. And if we can find a capital offense in all this offensiveness I'll have your head. It is hard to believe that you were once human."

Chartel was shamed and sick of heart and felt himself friendless. That night he attempted to hang himself in his cell. The attempt failed for reasons that are not clear but not for any lack of effort on his part. It is worthy of note that the only persons who ever attempt to take their own lives are rather serious persons.

"We will have to go to him at once, cristophe," said Veronica. "We must show him that we still love him. He'd sicken a jackal the way he's behaving, but he isn't really like that. The man underneath—"

"Hush, Veronica, you embarrass me when you talk like that," said ciabhach. "I know what a prince is the man underneath."

LITTLE c went to visit the Great Zambesi-Chartel in his cell.

"It is time we had a talk," he said.

"No, no, it's too late for talk," said Charles Chartel.

"You have disgraced us both, Charles," said celach. "It goes very deeply when it touches me."

"I never even knew who you were, little c. You are protean and you are not at all plausible."

"You called me up and you still don't know who I am, Charles? But this was our finest trick, our greatest illusion on which we worked subconsciously for years. We are our own masterpiece, Charles. And you didn't recognize it when it happened. You are the Magic Man but I am the Magic Man run wild. Aye, Charles, he's best when he runs wild."

"Tell me, cicerone, who are you? Who am I?" Chartel begged. "What is my difficulty?"

"Our difficulty, Charles, is that one of us became too serious," carnefice tried to explain. "To be serious is the only capital crime. For that, one of us will have to die—but it isn't as though it were a serious matter. Every man is at least two men, but ordinarily the two are not at the same time bodied and apparent. Now you have marred our greatest trick—but it was fun while it lasted."

Little c signaled to Veronica and she came down the corridor with a bunch of boards under her arm. She was admitted to the cell by the puzzled jailor.

"One of us will have to leave forever," coquelicot told Charles Chartel. "It isn't right for both of us to be around."

"Ah, I will be sorry to see you go, chandos," said Chartel. "But who are you? I never could remember your name properly and there is something weird about that. You change forever in appearance and name. Who are you, little c?"

"Only that. Just little c. Or shall we say sub-c? But we are too clever to be hounded into a hole like this, Charles. Remember! We were our own greatest trick, even if it failed."

"What must we do now?" Chartel asked dully.

"A simple transference," cogne said. He was building the box board by board.

"I'm not a bad man underneath," Chartel sniveled. "I'm misunderstood."

"No, we're a fine man underneath, Charles. I am the man underneath," said ciud. "Get in the box."

"*I* get in? I am Charles (the Great Zambesi) Chartel. You are only little c, sub-c, an aspect of myself. I will *not* get into the box!"

"Get in, Charles," said cistercium. "It was a mix-up from the beginning. You were never meant to see the light of day. The wrong one of us has been running loose."

"I'll fight, I'll claw, I'll rant!"

"That's what a healthy subconscious is supposed to do," cludok said. "Get in!"

"It's murder! I won't go! It's oblivion!"

"No such thing, Charles. It isn't as though we weren't the same person. I'll still be here."

Then little c and Veronica shoved the Great Zambesi Charles Chartel down into the box and closed the lid. In doing so, little c became himself the Great Zambesi. For, when he opened the box again, it was empty. And he took it apart board by board. The jailor said that he had to have his prisoner and Veronica gave him the boards.

"There, there, doll," she said. "Make one out of them. Try real hard."

And Veronica and the Great Zambesi left that place.

WE WON'T say that Zambesi wasn't the greatest magician in the world. He may have become the greatest, after he began to treat it lightly. People, he was good! There was never any act with such variety and fun in it. After his strange mid-life hiatus he achieved new heights.

"And I'm certainly glad you overcame your personality difficulties," the loving Veronica told him later. "For a while there—whoof! But I always knew you were a fine man underneath." •

(Continued from page 3)
best story of the year, best Retief story ever.

Rivals Mark Twain.

Eugene Reynolds
Roodhouse, Ill.

Dear Ejler:

If your writers will write stories with English settings, they ought to learn the English usage in the words "will," "shall," "would," and "should." Mr. Benford, in "3:02 P.M., Oxford" IF, *Sep.-Oct., 1970, pp. 97-107, 183ff) does it consistently wrong.*

Kaor,
L. Sprague de Camp

The British do the same to us.

Dear Sir:

In spite of doing a lot of reading, I rarely take the time to write about what I have read. I feel compelled to make an exception, however, and comment on Pinon Fall *by Michael Bishop in the Oct-Nov.* Galaxy. *The delicately haunting theme of this story remained with me long after I had finished reading it – not a commonplace occurrence.*

The writer shows a sensitivity of expression and a talent for original description not frequently encountered. I can still see "camels standing the snow." I look forward to reading more by Mr. Bishop.

Mrs. Charles E. Willis
Albany, Georgia 31705

Dear Mr. Jakobsson,

To comment your four magazines:

Blish's short novels are great. The latest in his Black Easter series was good, but I anticipated the punch line.

My god! The Heinlein Serial is in Five parts? [No, four—Ed.] *That means another six months. Will you go back on monthly schedules again?* [Galaxy is monthly again—Ed.]

IF *is good too. Davidson, Garett, Eisenberg, Niven. It's great. How about having Van Vogt go outside the Silkies series. Step this up to monthly. Semi monthly. Weekly. I'll buy it.*

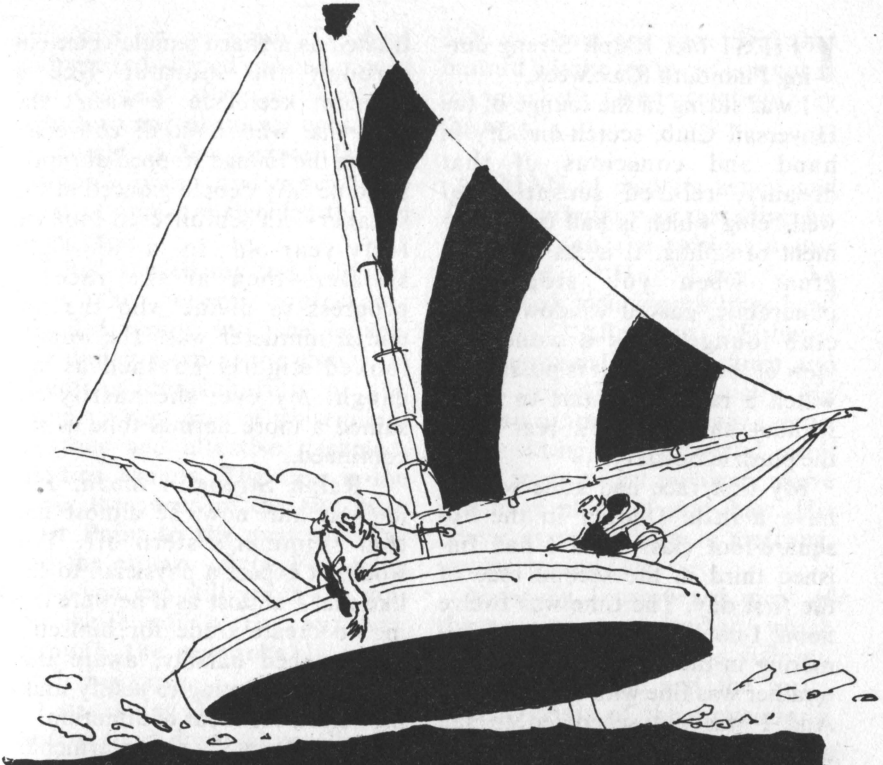
Worlds of Fanasy *was excellent. Del Rey's story was as good an anything he ever wrote. All the shorts were very good to excellent.* Walker between the Planes *was good, but Norton was unreadable (but then, I don't particularly care for Mrs. Norton). Schedule this regularly.*

Loomis in WOT *good, Laumer very good, Smith good. All the shorts very good to excellent, except for* Bridge. *It was mediocre as a story and somewhat smutty (don't tell me about imagery.) Step this up to a regular schedule.*

Ratings (on scale of ten) Galaxy *9.1, If 8.6,* Worlds of Fantasty *9.8, and* WOT *6.9. On the average fairly high, but* WOT *would have scored higher if you had left out* Bridge, *and gotten some good artwork.*

Artwork is my beef. Gaughan is good, but you're overloading him. How about Finlay, or Rotsler. You're peaking the ten-year cycle. Take advantage of it. Universal looks big enough to get some decent distribution. Good luck.

Hopefully,
Robert Bryan Lipton



BENEATH STILL WATERS

The alien knew a humanity that humans had forgotten . . .

MICHAEL G. CONEY

I FIRST met Ralph Streng during Finmouth Race week.

I was sitting in the lounge of the Hoversail Club, scotch-and-dry in hand and conscious of that dreamy, relaxed sensation of well-being which is half the enjoyment of sailing. It is, as they say, great when you stop. The panoramic, curved window of the club lounge gives a wonderful view of the bay and it is possible to watch a race from start to finish without shifting one's rear from the plush upholstery.

My first race had gone well—I have a little Dodger in the 50-square-foot class—and I had finished third in the second race of the first day. The time was twelve noon. I could smell the lunch simmering in the club's kitchens. The weather was fine with a fair breeze. And I was not scheduled to sail again until five o'clock. Plenty of time for another drink, lunch, then a comfortable afternoon in interesting company until my race.

Life was good; the office seemed light-years away.

Conversation was muted; the drone of sailing talk was easy, familiar upon my ears. I was half-listening to a group nearby, too idle in my euphoria to join in the conversation but finding the talk a pleasant background to my appreciation of the day's third race.

"He'll kill someone, one of these days."

Naturally my attention was attracted as a sharp female voice cut through the murmur like a titanium keelblade. I wasn't the only one who noticed; conversation in the lounge stopped abruptly as some fifty people glanced at the speaker—an embittered-looking forty-year-old in a too-tight sweater—then at the race in progress to divine who the potential murderer was. The woman looked slightly abashed as she caught my eye; she hastily resumed a more normal tone as she continued.

"Ralph Streng, I mean. Just look at him now, he almost had that skimmer's stern off. You wouldn't expect a physician to sail like that—almost as if he were trying to create trade for himself." She laughed harshly, aware that she was attempting to justify making herself the focus of attention.

"Now, Lucy," a plump armchair yachtsman mumbled through his cigar. "You know very well you were making a play for him last year and got the brush-off. He's a good sailor, the Doc. Taking that son of his with him today, too. There's a handicap for you."

"What the hell's he trying to prove?" demanded the woman. "Whatever it is, it won't be at my expense. Widowers get selfish; they should remarry," she finished illogically.

The conversation became general again as I watched the skimmers round the final marker

and head for the finish. The boat with the red-striped sail had moved into the lead after an incredibly tight turn and obviously could not be caught. A few minutes later a cannon's boom and a scattered burst of applause signaled the end of the race.

I had started my lunch by the time the recent contestants crowded noisily into the lounge. The dining room at the club is, in effect, a continuation of the lounge; a neat area of white tables for four and attentive, jacketed-and-tied waiters. The view is the same; the sweep of the bay from Hart Point to the west merging into the estuary of the Fin to the east—you can still watch the sailing while you work your way through the remarkably good lunch they serve.

I was dining alone and had been the first to sit down—I usually am. My wife informs me this is pure greed and evidence of my selfish nature, but I always tell her there is plenty for all and someone has to start first. It takes moral courage to be the first person into a large dining room full of predatory waiters.

Once again I had proved myself right for, encouraged by my example, others were now drifting in, sheeplike. At the next table waiters were bucketing Lucy and her escorts into chairs.

"Ralph, darling!" she cried suddenly. "Come and join our table. Tell us about the race. Did that bastard Clarke try to cut you out at the marker? Congratulations, by the way."

A MAN of medium height and heavy build was threading his way through the tables in our direction. "Hi, Lucy," he murmured, inclining his large head gravely. "Afternoon, Fisher—Zimmermann." He sat down and began to talk sailing, quietly. He was an impressive figure even when sitting, his powerful neck rising from a vast pullover; above it a huge mane of gray hair. His blue eyes were sharp in a strong, weatherbeaten face.

Naturally I overheard most of the ensuing conversation, which veered from sailing to fishing, biology, medicine and the forthcoming visit of the physicians' delegation from Canaral.

"To study the origins of life," Streng was explaining. "It would appear that Earth is a very much younger planet than Canaral. They are also doing work on cancer research."

"Do tell me, Ralph," Lucy asked with coy interest, "what do they look like?"

Streng chuckled, a deep rumble. "I've no idea. It never occurred to me to wonder, believe it or not. I tend to look on fellow scientists as minds rather than bodies. All I know is they're about our size and bipeds. That information, my

dear Lucy, was supplied by the immigration authorities when they asked me to put one of the team up at Cliffside." He paused, aware of the effect of his words.

"You mean you're going to have one staying with you?" The woman squealed. Her hand was resting on Streng's forearm.

"He arrives Sunday night and will be staying until Friday."

Lucy was regarding Streng through wide eyes. "Oh, Ralph, do ask me along to meet him. I've never met an alien. May I come one evening? I simply must meet him. Will he be green, do you think?" She giggled in a grotesque parody of girlishness.

Beside her, the man called Zimmermann met my eyes, then raised his own to the ceiling in mock supplication as he lit his after-lunch cigar.

I paid my bill and left the dining room, glad that I was not able to number Lucy among my acquaintances and resolving that during the coming week I would make sure things stayed that way.

Streng interested me, however; it was difficult to reconcile the mild-mannered but compelling man in the dining room with a fiercely ruthless racing sailor. He had struck me as a man of sound common sense, which didn't tally with his disregard for personal safety—and the safety of others—when racing. Particularly as he had a young boy aboard with him.

At the seaward side of the clubhouse, which is built into a cliff-face, a steep flight of concrete steps leads down to the club jetty where the craft bobbed gently at anchor within the shelter of Finmouth breakwater. I descended with the idea of getting a bit of exercise after lunch and filling *Jayne II* with fuel so that I wouldn't have to do this at the last minute before the race, when there would be a queue at the pump.

As I hauled on the rope, drawing *Jayne II* toward the jetty, I noticed Streng's boat, red-striped sail flapping idly, floating nearby. Sitting on the foredeck and gazing out to sea while he trailed a hand in the water was a boy of about twelve whom I took to be Streng's son. As *Jayne II* drifted past he looked around and, as his eye followed the line of the rope that stretched taut to my hand, he turned sideways and I saw his face. The eyes were slanted, his complexion pale. The nose was thick around the nostrils and the ears protruded lumpy from the head which, about the crown, was curiously flat. As he looked at me he smiled, loose lipped.

He was a mongol. I wondered what kind of man could take such a boy sailing and take further risks by sailing dangerously.

THERE seemed to be some problem with Streng's Dodger.

Maybe he hadn't had time to check it that day as he had previously been racing in the 150-square-foot Skimmer class. The judges were giving him a rough time.

We were milling about, waiting for the gun, when the launch swept out from the jetty and stopped alongside Streng; apparently they had noticed some unaccountable drift.

Now the rules at Race Week are strict and the judges meticulous. The motor which provides the hoversailer with lift must not exceed 250cc and must not give any directional motion. Forward motion of the boat is provided entirely by the action of the wind on the sails as in oldtime sailboats and the handling is similar, except that the only part of the hoversailer actually touching the water is the thin keelblade. Given a moderate breeze, the craft can move very fast.

It appeared that one of Streng's vanes had become displaced, causing the downthrust of air to emerge at an angle; the flippers of a frogman thrashed the surface as he probed beneath the craft, making adjustments. Streng's expression was ominous as the other competitors, motors popping and boats riding easily, tacked around passing derisive comments. There is something peculiarly comic about the appearance of a lame, wallowing hoversailer.

Eventually repairs were completed and the judges' launch roared off, the judges giving Streng a last, suspicious glance. A brief period of jockeying for position followed and then the race was underway. A tight bunch close-hauled for the first buoy. Streng was to my starboard, his face set in concentration as he willed his craft to pull clear of the ruck. His son sat quietly in the small well just aft of the mast, smiling and from time to time waving at the other competitors.

The breeze had freshened and we were moving fast as we approached the first marker where we were to turn for a long, broad reach across the bay to the second marker, which signaled a straight run for home. Streng tacked to bring him closer to the marker for his turn, I followed and the rest of the pack tagged along, unwilling to take a chance by trying something different. By now Streng and I were a couple of lengths ahead of the field; somehow I had felt it would come to this.

I led him fractionally to the turn but he drifted to leeward as he went about, forcing me to drop behind. It was cleverly done and gained him a length. He didn't look in my direction—he was staring ahead fixedly—but he knew I knew what he had done. I felt a surge of blind rage but fought it down. There's no profit in losing your temper during a race.

In any event, I knew I had him on the broad reach because, although our craft were evenly matched, he was carrying more weight. I was gaining as we swept for the final turn, despite having trouble with my equalizer.

I wonder if seeing me fiddling with the controls gave Streng his idea.

The equalizer is a device that directs extra pressure into the leeward side of the craft's cushion of air when the wind is coming from abeam, so that instead of heeling over she continues to ride upright, reaping the maximum advantage of the breeze. My equalizer was playing up; every now and then the boat would lurch perceptibly.

Nevertheless I was gaining, inching up on Streng as he stared furiously ahead, his thick gray hair flopping in the wind, his strong jaw set. The son was watching me vacantly and I heard Streng snarl at him, as the poor lad absently trailed his fingers in the water.

We were neck and neck, no more than a handsbreadth separating our craft as we went for the turn. I had been calculating that there would be no need to jib, just a close turn around the buoy and a quick run for the finish; leaving Streng, with his extra weight, well behind.

I was outside as we turned, marginally in the lead. I knew what followed was deliberate because I was watching Streng's face.

His hand was on the equalizer control and, veering, his craft suddenly heeled violently. He uttered a shout of simulated alarm for the benefit of those behind. His boom lashed across towards me, the sail cracking in a thunderous jib. I flung up my arm, received a smashing blow on the elbow, felt the boats collide violently and was thrown into the low well. As I pulled myself up one-armed, sick with pain, I caught sight of Streng's fierce backward grin as he eased his boat into an unbeatable lead.

I seemed to have lost the use of my arm. I thought it was broken. Gathering up the ropes one-handed I set in hopeless pursuit, steering with my foot, senseless with rage.

I DON'T know exactly what I intended to do; follow Streng into the club perhaps and dispute the result of the race with the judges. But I wouldn't have stood a chance; for one thing Streng was local and I was an outsider. There was also the point—and this really rankled—that he cut a far more impressive figure than I: I knew that his personal magnetism would carry the judges. One only had to remember the woman Lucy; she could dismember Streng from a distance, but once under the influence of those deep eyes and leonine impression of suppressed power and she fawned over him.

At that moment, however, I

could only think of getting to grips with the man and wiping that overbearing confidence from his face with my one good hand.

The cannon sounded with Streng twenty lengths ahead. To my surprise he continued on his course, leaving the club to port and making for the wide mouth of the Fin estuary. I followed, puzzled at his passing up the chance to bask in the congratulations of his fellow yachtsmen and assuming in my ignorance that maybe his conscience was troubling him.

The mouth of the Fin is strewn with sandbanks; the boat with the red-striped sail was weaving its way through and I was closing, using Streng as a pilot. To our left lay the holiday resort of Finmouth, beyond which rose the cliffs and, now passing out of view, the Hoversail club. Further ahead the estuary narrowed between steep green-wooded slopes, the still water colored with moored yachts of all sizes. I wondered how far upstream Streng's house lay; the tide was receding and mudflats appeared at the water margins. *Jayne II* slowed as we reached the narrower reach and I was glad of the following wind; I wouldn't have liked to beat against that strong current.

Streng had glanced over his shoulder and seen me following. His course became erratic and I guessed he was trying to lead me aground on a mudflat. Reaching forward I winched up the keel-blade so that the small rudder became the only part of the craft actually touching the water. With the wind behind, this does not cause any significant loss of control.

We passed a small village of pink-and-white cottages clustered about the water's edge under the shadow of the hills and I saw what I took to be Streng's house. Set among the trees on the steep slope beyond the village, it was the last sign of habitation before the estuary narrowed, about a mile farther, into a shallow race tumbling from the distant moorland. Steps dropped from the house to a ramshackle wooden landing stage.

By now I was close and saw what happened clearly. Streng dropped the sail deftly, steering straight for the stage and relying on the current to slow him. At the last moment he cut his motor, his craft sank to water. He jumped to the stage, holding a painter which he made fast, then turned to assist his son ashore. The boy leaped, grabbing for his father's hand, but missed his footing. Streng, reaching and overbalancing, tottered with flailing arms and in an instant the two of them were floundering in the muddy water, drifting with the current away from the landing stage.

Handicapped by my injured arm, I made a wide pass in their direction, then dropped everything

and threw a rope to Streng, who had drifted near. He scrambled aboard quickly, dripping.

"For God's sake get the boy," he gasped, plucking at the tiller and getting in my way. "He can't swim. Hurry, man!"

Looking back on the episode, I wonder how I restrained myself. Streng had smashed my arm and made it a near impossibility to control the boat. He had taken a mongol child sailing without a life-jacket. He had been responsible for the boy's falling in. Yet here he was giving orders on my own boat. Did he think I wanted the boy to drown?

But at the time it was different. Streng's face was contorted with fear, the boy was struggling twenty yards away and the situation was desperate.

"You'd better take over," I said mildly, moving forward. "I can't move my left arm."

In a flurry of ropes and legs we changed places and Streng, whipping in the sail like a maniac, whirled the craft around and began to beat against the wind in short, qick tacks.

"Oh, God—oh, God—" he muttered as he tacked swiftly, his huge head jerking this way and that with each turn, his eyes fixed on his struggling son. "It's all right, Tom, it's all right!" he shouted desperately, his voice echoing up the wooded slopes. "Just keep up. Keep up. I'm coming! Oh, God—" His lips were trembling and his hand was bone-white on the tiller.

"Easy, Tom, easy," I said, leaning out and grasping the boy under the arms as we swept by, drawing him across the foredeck, where he lay gagging and coughing. Streng pushed me aside roughly and an agonizing pain stabbed my elbow.

"It's all right now, Tom," he murmured, kneeling on the foredeck and patting the boy on the back. "Everything's all right now. We'll soon have you home and in bed— Get the bloody boat under control," he snarled suddenly, glaring up at me. "Back to the house, quickly."

Now that the crisis was past, this was too much for me. I stood up, bracing myself against the mast as the hoversail, motor puttering, headed aimlessly across the estuary.

"Just who the flaming hell do you think you are?" I asked as quietly as I could manage. "What right have you got to give me orders after what's happened?"

His eyes were frightening, red-rimmed. "I said get this bloody boat back to the house!" he shouted. "Are you blind, man? Can't you see this boy's a mongol? Don't you know how easily he'll get pneumonia?"

"No, I don't know," I replied, with forced, enraged callousness. After all, you're the doctor, not me. Maybe you should have

thought of this before you took him sailing."

He stared at me. Suddenly his shoulders relaxed. He blinked and his eyes were calmer. "Would you mind getting us back to the house?" he asked quietly. "Perhaps you'd like to come up for a drink and I'll take a look at that arm of yours."

Obediently I seated myself at the tiller.

"NO DAMAGE done." Streng concluded his examination of my elbow. "Jarred a nerve, I expect. You may get a bit of a bruise there later."

"Thanks," I replied sarcastically. Streng left to get changed—the boy had already been taken in hand by the housekeeper, a gaunt old maid named, oddly, Sylvia—and I relaxed in the deep armchair, gazing around the room and sipping Johnny Walker.

It was obviously, a man's room. An old-fashioned open fire blazed in an untidy hearth and the mantelpiece was littered with pipes, tobacco jars, paperbacks and a glass bottle in which an obscene lump of flesh was suspended in liquid. More books on the shelves which flanked the fireplace; mostly medical tomes with an occasional adventure story. I got up and wandered about, my footsteps cushioned by deep carpet. The chairs were leather, brass-studded and old; the corners of the room held assorted items of sporting equipment—a bag of golf clubs, half a pair of oars to which was tied a pair of rowlocks, an ancient, suicidal twelvebore and a pair of tennis shoes which looked, if anything, even older. There was the walnut cabinet which held an astonishing array of liquor, the small bookcase with the model Cutty Sark on top—everything, the complete bachelor setup in kit form, somehow a little to comprehensive to be true.

I didn't believe it. I sat down again, this time at the window, and watched real life in the form of an elderly rowing boat whose occupants were genuinely, if abortively, spinning for bass.

This room was fake. The stuff had been placed there, not just allowed to accumulate but placed to create an effect; maybe to convince Streng himself that he was a normal G.P. living a normal, comfortable bachelor existence.

"How do you like my little place?" He had entered quietly and spoke quietly, uttering the conventional words pleasantly, smiling. "How about a refill?"

"Thanks." I handed him my glass. "It's very— comfortable. You have varied interests."

He gave me a curious look as he bent to fiddle with the bottles. "I keep myself amused," he replied. "And Sylvia is very capable."

"She looks after Tom?" I ventured.

He passed that one over and made a brief but extraordinarily convincing apology for the race episode. The man was smooth and my temper, which had begun to rise again at the sight of him, ebbed. After the near-drowning, arguing didn't seem quite so important.

"Tell me," he resumed abruptly, passing me a full glass and sitting down, "what were your thoughts when you saw me fall in the river? I mean, what did you really think? Be honest, now." He grinned disarmingly.

"I thought it served you damned well right."

"Naturally. So why did you pull me out?"

"Because you might have drowned, of course. And your son, too."

"That may be obvious to you, but I would like to know the true reason why you pulled me out of the water." He regarded me quizzically, puffing volumes of pipe smoke.

I felt on the defensive, but was amused by his persistance.

"Because I believe in the sanctity of human life," I replied.

"Try again."

Damn the man; I felt compelled to have another go.

"Because I feel it's the thing to do, to rescue another sailor in difficulties; or anyone else, for that matter."

"No," he said calmly, smiling.

"Because I was scared that if I didn't rescue you—you would be on my conscience for the rest of my life."

"Getting warmer. Do go on, Mr. Warren. This is interesting."

I felt as though I were taking part in an experiment; an important one, from Streng's point of view. "Because," I said at last, "I was frightened that someone might see me letting you drown."

He laughed, a deep, reassuring sound. "Excellent. You're quite right, of course; but it took you a long time to get there."

"You don't think of these things right away," I said with sarcasm.

"We all do just what we want to do, Mr. Warren, always. We can't blame a thief for being a thief, or a murderer for killing. You wanted to save me and at the same time you didn't want to save me. Quickly, so quickly you were not aware of it, you weighed the pros and cons. And you decided you wanted to save me more than you didn't want to. It was the least unpleasant of the possibilities. The easiest way out. You would have hated to be branded a murderer."

"What about you, at the final marker buoy?" I asked.

"I wanted to win the race. I had no fear of being caught out, and I didn't know you from Adam."

"You're just bloody immoral."

"Amoral, Mr. Warren. We all are but I admit it." He chuckled.

Against my better, or moral,

judgment, as the evening wore on I began to like the man. He was trying to be honest. We sat drinking scotch and talking through a haze of blue smoke while night fell outside and the firelight took over, throwing crimson flickers among the leather and walnut.

"Have you ever read Canaral philosophy?" he was asking, gazing into the bowl of his pipe. "The immigration people mailed me a book, so I wouldn't drop any gaffes with this weirdo they're sending me. It's fascinating. They're telepathic and, so they say, are all members, cells if you like, of one overall being. So they naturally act for the good of one another. Unlike us. Imagine that. No murders, no theft, no adultery. A totally ethical community." He laughed. "Bloody boring if you ask me."

I smiled. I was becoming attuned to his way of thinking.

THE following day was Sunday and, due to the centuries-old view of Finmouth Town Council that competitive open-air sport is sinful, there was no racing. The faithful gathered at the club as usual, however, and the day was spent in practice and tuning up the craft for the week to come. Ralph Streng appeared after lunch, having motored down with the intention of sailing his second craft back to Cliffside for minor adjustments.

"By the way," he said. "Do you fancy the idea of coming up for a bite of dinner at my place tonight? Sylvia's a passable cook and I think you'll find it interesting; our visitor from Canaral should be there."

I accepted his invitation gratefully; I was staying at a small guest house in Finmouth and had found the inmates a dull crowd; there seemed to be no middle ground between elderly women and young, noisy families. And I was looking forward to meeting the alien.

I arrived at Cliffside at nine o'clock, later than I had intended, having missed my way several times in the dark, winding lanes. Streng greeted me at the door.

"Glad to see you could make it, Arthur." He was grinning secretively. "Our visitor's arrived," he added, dropping his voice. "Not quite what I expected, although he *is* a biped."

He ushered me into his den, study or whatever he called it. "Come and have a Tio Pepe before dinner. Chandi, meet Mr. Arthur Warren, a friend of mine. A fellow yachtsman."

A wraithlike creature uncoiled from a chair and took my hand gently. Slow-moving and soft-spoken, he stood about six foot six, very slender and looking somehow pliable, like soft putty. His hand was warm and dry to the touch.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Arthur Warren," Chandi murmured.

"Call him Arthur," Streng urged. "We got on Christian name terms last night, after some initial difficulty."

"Arthur." The alien sat down slowly. He was dressed in a close-fitting coverall of silken material which accentuated his slender form. His features were reassuringly humanoid. "So you—ah—race boats, too. You compete. How very interesting."

I gathered that the concept of sporting competition—possibly any sort of competition—was new to his way of thinking. He asked a number of questions politely, listening attentively to our replies. Chandi and Streng, I thought with some amusement, represented completely opposite types. I wondered how they would make out in the next few days.

"We do not compete on Canaral," Chandi was explaining. "The necessity does not arise. We are a very old race, you know, and possibly a little set in our ways. Unadventurous, you would say. We research, we philosophize — but how can we compete, when we are telepathic among ourselves and all members of the same mother body, just as the individual physical cells are members of our physical bodies?"

"How about overpopulation?" asked Streng. "Surely the real basis for competition is the search for—and defense of—living room and food supplies?"

"We do not suffer from overpopulation. That is a disease, if you will forgive me, of Earth and similar young cultures."

"Euthanasia," I heard Streng mutter. "Do you put your old people to sleep—kill them, I mean, and—" he asked with a very obvious effort—"destroy malformed and idiot children at birth?"

There was a long silence. At last Chandi spoke. "It is too easy to destroy, Ralph; maybe that is the trouble with Earth. The really difficult and worthwhile thing is to create."

Over dinner the talk turned naturally to Streng's curious views on human psychology.

"It's all a question of relative advantage to the individual," he was explaining as we sipped our liqueurs. "To take a simple example—theft. Let us say I see a camera in a shop window. I can take it while the shopkeeper's attention is elsewhere. But my desire to do so is more than counterbalanced by the fear of consequences if somebody sees me. So I don't take the camera.

"But suppose I *found* the camera, say in the street, and no one saw me pick it up. Even if the address of the owner were in the case the chances are I would keep it."

"How do you explain the frequent return of lost property?" I asked.

"Easy. Either the finder doesn't

want the article at all, or he desires the goodwill of the true owner more than the article itself. A desire for the approval of others plays a big part in our makeup."

"Don't you ever experience a feeling of obligation to return a favor, Ralph?" asked Chandi in some amusement.

"Never," he replied flatly. "But I admit that I desire the approval of my fellow men, which is the same thing. I'm working on it, though."

"You may become the next step in evolution, Ralph." I laughed. "Homo Independent."

He looked at me, huge head strong with shadow and deep eyes serious in the candlelight. "Who knows?" he said softly. "Just imagine the truly honest world, where no man is held responsible for his actions because all men realize that such actions are determined by circumstance alone. Because every man is entirely and admittedly a slave to his desires. The concept of evil would be meaningless. Evil would not exist."

"Neither would good," observed Chandi gravely.

IN THE days that followed I was glad to see that I had at least made some small impact on Ralph Streng. Apparently acknowledging the dangers involved, he no longer took Tom sailing with him. I mentioned this to Chandi on the Saturday afternoon, the last day of Race Week, as we sat together in the club lounge.

"Our friend Ralph is in some torment," the alien observed in his gentle tones. "He desires to prove that, despite all evidence to the contrary, the boy is a normal human being, capable of taking part in normal pursuits. Yet at the same time he wishes the boy dead, because that is in accordance with his strange beliefs. He will never speak of Tom in casual conversation."

Somewhat shaken by this outspoken summary I said nothing but watched the boats as they streamed across the bay. The club members had grown accustomed to Chandi by now and his presence drew few curious glances.

Streng was racing; lying third, he was showing little of the fire that characterized his sailing in company with Tom. Nevertheless, I noticed the red-sailed craft gain a place at the turn by a ruthless, though permissible, piece of bluff. A slight mixup occurred at the final marker and Streng emerged from the ruck with a clear lead, which he held to the finish. As the boats drifted in toward the jetty I saw one of the competitors, a mild-mannered little man by the name of Banner with whom I had occasionally had a drink, gesticulating furiously and quite out of character. His boat was under tow.

"God damn it, man!" Banner

was shouting as the group entered the lounge, "you could have killed me! You saw what he did—" he addressed one of the group—"cut close and jibbed at the turn. Deliberate, it was—" The small man was trembling with indignation.

Ralph Streng ignored the shrill protestations, pausing at my chair. "Hello, there, Arthur," he said. "Care for another drink?"

Banner hovered at his elbow, yelping like an ill-tempered puppy.

I said I would have a scotch and, as Streng turned for the bar, Banner stood in his way.

"I asked you whether you had any intention of paying for the damage to my boat," he repeated, pale with rage.

Streng paused, at last acknowledging Banner's presence. He eyed the small man up and down in contemptuous silence. I don't think there was a person in the lounge who wasn't watching. At last he spoke, quietly.

"My own opinion, Mr. Er—, is that if a man is frightened of the risks involved, he shouldn't race. Particularly if he doesn't have the financial means to pay for normal damage incurred."

Was it the supreme confidence of Streng or Banner's palpable air of futility or both? I don't know, but I saw a number of people nodding in accord with Streng's statement and there was a general murmur of agreement. Beside me I felt Chandi stiffen slightly; he was watching Streng closely.

"Our friend Ralph is a very powerful man," he whispered. "But he has his weak point. He would never believe that the average human is too considerate to hit him where it really hurts."

Banner, almost in tears, was spluttering incoherently; a friend took him by the elbow, led him quietly away and stood him at the bar with a large scotch. He took the glass and drank automatically, eyes still on Streng.

"Here you are, Arthur." Streng handed me my drink and sat down. "Good race, that."

"What was all the row about?" I asked curiously.

"That little rabbit got in my way at the final turn and forced me to jib. My boom carried his shrouds away as it swung over. His mast came down. Who is he anyway?" He turned, gazing at Banner who stared back furiously. "Is he a member? I don't recall seeing him before. Not that he has a memorable face."

"To sum up," I remembered something from a week ago, "You don't know him from Adam and you jibbed your boom into him."

"Something like that." Streng smiled slowly. "Happens all the time, doesn't it?"

"Excuse me." Chandi spoke. "I don't quite understand this. In human psychology there is a distinction between harm coming to

someone you don't know and to someone you do?"

"There is." I answered before Streng could utter one of his theoretical generalizations. "Your race, being telepathic and in intimate sympathy with one another, probably wouldn't understand. I can't really explain it myself."

"I can." Streng jumped in. "Look at it this way, Chandi. Given a spaceline disaster, my only reaction is morbid interest as to whether any death-toll records may be broken. But if Arthur, here, died, I would feel regret at the loss of a source of intellectual stimulation—"

Which was nice to know.

STRENG knew how to do things well. We had dined on local roast duck and a couple of bottles of Montrachet. Now we sat in the study, sipping champagne in honor of Chandi's imminent departure, gazing into the fire and talking in desultory, well-fed fashion.

"I cannot overemphasize, Chandi," Streng was saying, slightly drunk, "the selfishness of the human animal. Even the emotion of sympathy is the fear that a similar misfortune may befall oneself."

"Sometimes, Ralph," the alien's tone was soft and slow, tired, "I feel sorry for you. How do you explain that?"

"Well, I tell you one thing, Chandi; I'll be sorry to see you go. And Arthur here. What time do they come to pick you up?"

The alien glanced at the clock. "In about an hour's time."

"Time for another." As Streng rose to refill the glasses the door swung open and Tom rushed in, ran across to Chandi and clung to his knee. He looked around at us with his slanting, pink-rimmed eyes, then buried his face in the alien's silken clothes. I regarded Streng anxiously; it was clear that he tried to keep Tom away from people; it would be a pity if Streng made a scene on this last night.

But Streng, mellow with wine, was smiling.

"You should be in bed, Tom," he admonished gently.

"Chandi," the boy said. It was the first word I had heard him utter.

The alien was watching Streng. "In all your arguments, Ralph, there's one human trait you've failed to mention," he observed gravely. "The one saving, unselfish trait. That is the love of a mother—or a father—for a child."

The room was suddenly very still. The occasional crackle from the fire sounded loud. At last Streng spoke.

"It's born in us," he said harshly. "For the purpose of protecting and furthering the species."

"I must take issue with you. In this case that does not apply. Earlier this week you explained

mongolism to me—that extra chromosome in each body cell which makes all the difference. I know, and you know, that to all intents this boy is not a member of the species. He and his kind are creatures apart. They are not human in the accepted sense of the word. There is no rational cause for you to love him."

"Damn you," muttered Streng. "Leave me alone, will you?" He sat down abruptly, staring at Tom.

"No, you must listen to me, Ralph," insisted the alien. "I've been watching you closely this last week and I've felt genuine, irrational sympathy for you, seeing you torturing yourself to prove something. To prove that, twelve years ago when you lost God, you lost your humanity as well. And all the time burning at the back of your mind is that terrible guilt; you're a doctor, but you can't cure your own son."

Streng said nothing. He sat with his head in his hands as if trying to shut out the truth of what he was hearing. He gazed at the tumbling, sparkling embers and the crimson glow shot his gray mane with gold. I took another sip of champagne nervously; the acid bubbles rasped my tongue and effervesced down my throat. Chandi was leaning back in his chair, a slender hand resting on Tom's fair head. From time to time the boy uttered small, unintelligible murmurs.

"But I can cure Tom," said Chandi.

IT WOULDN'T take long, he told us. He gave the boy a drink of some thick fluid, yellowish; then brought a rectangular piece of apparatus into the room, set it down and plugged it in. All the time he explained in his soft, slow tones.

"The fluid rapidly permeates the system and is absorbed into each cell. As you know, Ralph, the main purpose of our visit to Earth was to study malignant cellular diseases. You may not appreciate the connection between mongolism and cancer—but a connection there is. Both relate to the composition of the cells, a study which has always interested us, back on Canaral; due in part to the composition of our own unique society—"

As he spoke he was attaching a multitude of electrodes to various parts of the boy's body. Tom lay still on the sofa, watching Chandi silently.

"I came to your house for a specific purpose; to study Tom, a fact which for obvious reasons I was not able to tell you until now. There are some subjects on which even the hardiest extrovert is sensitive. I will now pass an electrical charge through Tom's body which will react upon the fluid I gave him, an organic substance which itself has an affinity

to that single extra chromosome— Don't be afraid, Ralph. No harm will come to the boy."

He threw a switch—it seemed an irreversible action and I noticed Streng stiffened in his chair. Chandi left the apparatus and sat down.

"In about ten minutes you should begin to see a change," he said. "Some of the changes may be sudden and I must remind you that every cell in the boy's body is undergoing partial destruction. Do not be alarmed. After all, as I told you last Sunday," here he looked directly at Streng, his eyes unfathomable, "it is a simple matter to destroy—"

Streng did not reply; indeed, he hadn't spoken for a long time. He had merely shifted his position so that his eyes were on Tom, brooding. Heaven knows what fundamental reorganization of concepts, what tearing emotional stress was taking place in that strange mind. He looked like a man close to a complete breakdown; his eyes were hollow and a tic plucked at his cheek.

I followed his eyes and presently witnessed a miracle.

Tom's fingers were changing shape. The stumpy mongoloid hands were lengthening, the digits becoming straight, slender. I looked at his face, saw the thick, small ears becoming finer, the lobes distinct. Slowly the nose gained shape, and the eyes— The brows appeared darkly, like Streng's. The eyelids lost their slant, the whole aspect of the face became, slowly and wonderfully, transfigured.

Much later Chandi disconnected the apparatus. I don't know what I expected; maybe for Tom to address us in normal tones. I do know I would have been scared stupid if he had.

But he sat up quietly, looking at us. He stood and went over to where Streng was still sitting.

"Dad," he said and took his father's hand.

Chandi began packing his equipment.

"He still has the mental age of a three-year-old," he said. "You must be patient with him, Ralph. He'll learn quickly, now."

I poured myself a scotch; my hand was trembling violently and the bottle beat a nervous tattoo on the rim of the glass. There was nothing I could say and Streng appeared to be in a stupor. I was relieved to see the lights of a car swing down the drive. I went to the front door to delay the arrivals until some sort of normalcy was restored to the house.

The car was large, discreetly ostentatious. The doors shut with an expensive clunk and the unnervingly dreamlike sensation brought about by recent events was heightened by the sight of the trio which confronted me.

One was human, uniformed, a chauffeur. "Dr. Streng?" he asked.

"My name's Warren," I answered. "Dr. Streng is inside."

The other two were large, powerful aliens.

"Alini and Tubon," introduced the chauffeur. "For Chandi, of the Canaral delegation and scientific investigation team."

I motioned them in, moving aside to allow the huge figures of the aliens to tramp past.

"In here—" I opened the study door.

Inside, Streng still sat in his chair, his arm around Tom who was smiling into his face. Chandi was moving toward us, carrying his equipment.

"Alini—Tubon," he observed with grave pleasure. "It's good of you to come for me. Obviously you have met Mr. Warren. This is Dr. Streng, my host. Ralph, meet my compatriots."

Streng stood automatically and, staring, shook hands stiffly. I looked in bewilderment from the gross, dynamic figures of the two newcomers to the slender, slow Chandi. They might have been different species.

"I don't understand," mumbled Streng, embarrassed at the loss of his habitual composure. "You're surely not from Canaral?" His deep eyes widened.

Perhaps, in that moment, he understood. I don't know.

"The difference in appearance puzzles you?" asked Chendi lightly. "We are an old race, Ralph; cells of an ancient and great organism. Cells grow old and are replaced. I told you we have no population problem and no need for euthanasia. I am old and will shortly be replaced. I shall die before I reach Canaral and on our planet another cell will come into existence. Don't let it bother you. It doesn't bother me; I am able only to think in terms of the race as a whole—and my last days have been very well spent."

At last Streng broke down completely; face contorted in great agony and glistening with tears, he clutched at Chandi's arm. "Surely there's something I can do. I'm a doctor, surely I can help you in some way?"

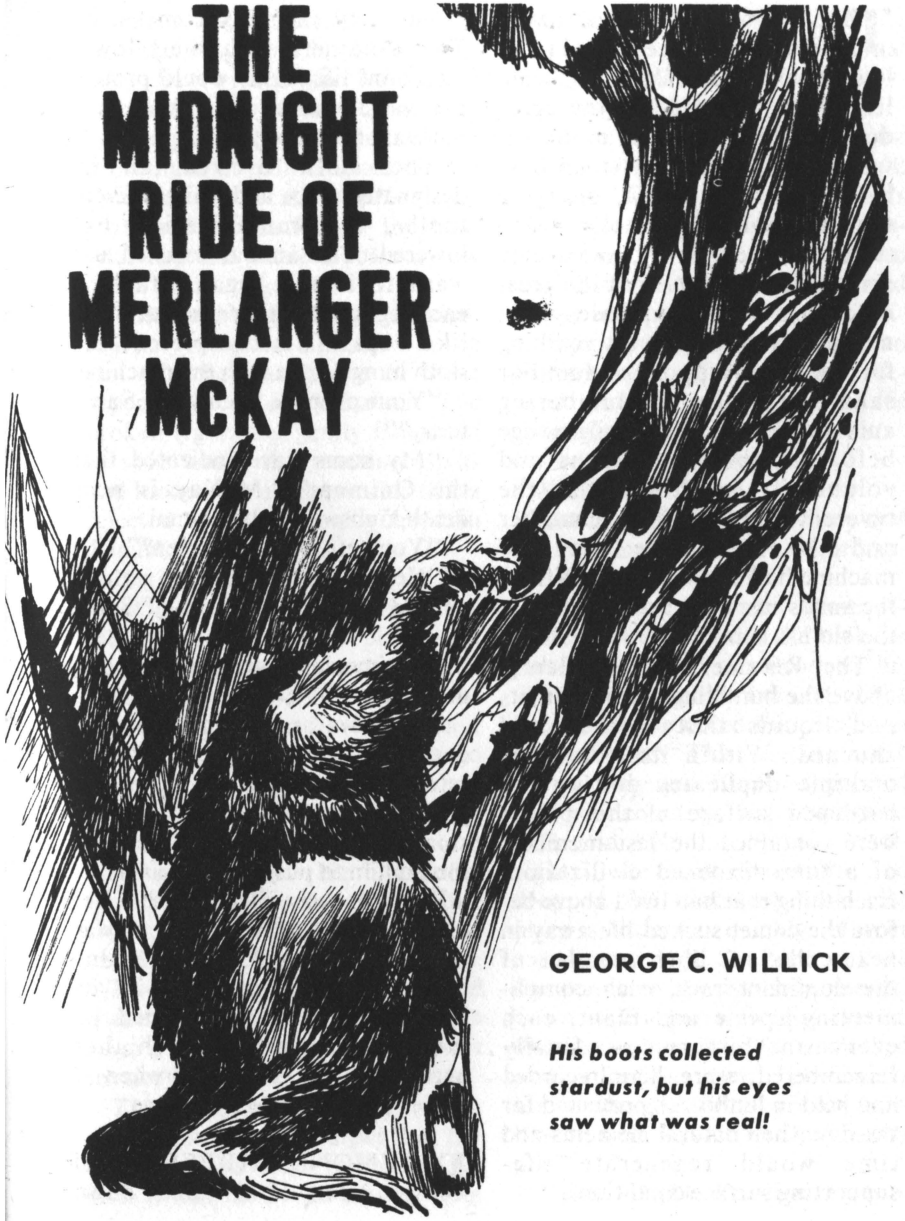
"What would it profit you, Ralph?"

"No!" Streng's voice was a cry of despair. "I don't want anything! After all you've done for me, for God's sake tell me how I can help you!"

Gently Chandi disengaged himself and turned for the door. "God is an excuse for lesser men than yourself, Ralph," he said quietly. "You discovered twelve years ago that there is no God. But remember that there is still humanity."

He departed, followed by his companions, leaving the three of us to the long silence of the autumn evening. ●

THE MIDNIGHT RIDE OF MERLANGER McKAY



GEORGE C. WILLICK

His boots collected stardust, but his eyes saw what was real!

THE carbon-lead door of the entrance shaft broke its seal to allow the entrance of a giant, headless sloth. Beyond lay the great dome of the upper edges of the Retainer and the animal stooped to half-size as it entered, dragging the last remnants of its plastic stirrups. It moved slowly, awkwardly across the smoothness of the great machine's too-warm base plate; muffled, stumbling hoofs yearning for the firm support of familiar sand and rock. The lumbering animal had made this pilgrimage before, both on summons and voluntarily as now. Still, the reverent silence of the chamber and the knowledge that the machine had created its kind from the sands inspired awesomeness in the sloth's being.

The Retainer flowed silently above the humbling sloth, in lights and liquids that worked and churned. Within itself and its multiple duplicates dotting the hardened surface of this planet were contained the last members of a time-deadened civilization. Each thing that had lived above before the comet sucked life away in near collision. Each member of the dominant race, each complimenting specie and plant, each event in history as finally remembered, were here recorded and held in limbo . . . protected for the day when natural elements and time would regenerate life-supporting surface conditions.

But until that day came again The Retainers with their lower attendant life-forms would protect the world against disaster: cosmic, natural or extraphysical.

The sloth arrived at its designated place and waited. Eventually, a communication bar lowered. The animal reached upward to it and began attaching each leg into the four circular plug-like cups. This completed, the sloth hung as one with the machine.

"Your purpose in entering Sanctuary?"

"My sums have indicated that the Outmapper McKay is near death," answered the animal.

"You petition for an alien?"

"Yes. He has lived long among us and honored the laws of Sanctuary."

"An invader has no place among us."

"Dare we assume to allow this event of time to pass without retaining something of it for our peers?" The sloth felt intense tension as his unexplainable devotion forced him to push the Retainer.

The bar was silent as the Retainer did not answer . . . nor was the sloth released. The machine had reached an impasse with its programing and had turned its functions inward to a higher authority. The decision, when it came, would be a Martian one.

RAYMOND HARPER pushed the palms of his hands down

against the mattress and tried to ease the weight on his hips. Carefully he twisted his left leg a fraction in each direction. Nothing. A little more this time. A white flash of pain blanked out his vision as his breath *wooshed* out. Harper sank back into the hospital bed and made a solemn vow not to try that again.

The throbbing slowly subsided. Harper resigned himself to the fact that he wasn't one of those superhealers he'd heard about. The broken leg swung gently from side to side under the traction cords and looked for all the worlds like a rejected stone carving lynched in disgust.

Harper had just passed his first night in Speer's General Hospital. He felt badly out of place and wished he were home watering the lawn or fixing the Jiffy Mealer or something. But here he lay, lassoed by a busted leg he'd earned from momentary stupidity. It had been one of those mental slips of an instant when the rest of him had known better. He had fallen from the end of an ore pipe while trying to kick a derrick-maneuvered joining section into place. Why men occasionally considered themselves more formidable than several tons of inert metal was a mystery to Harper. Damn foolish.

The sounds of steady *click-clacking* heels told Harper that the day nurse was about to descend on him. A whiteness with a face swung into the semiprivate room, smiling that frozen smile of professional synthetic understanding and carrying a tray full of healing delights.

"Good morning and how are we today?" And before Harper could answer, "Oh, really? Well, that's nice. Here. Let's take your temperature." Harper managed to open his mouth in time to avoid having his lips impaled.

Fighting back the inclination to go crosseyed, Harper glared beyond the glass rod obstructing his vision and was met look for look.

"Bowels move yesterday?"

What the hell, lady.

But he nodded affirmatively and ignored images of what might happen if he told the truth.

"That's nice," the nurse repeated out of reflex as she took his pulse. Satisfied, she dropped his wrist and moved to the end of the bed where she noted the results on a clipboard. The writing took overly long and Harper suspected she was counting his respiration rate and held his breath. "All-right," she said cheerfully and dropped the clipboard back into place a little too quickly. Harper eased out a sigh. She took out the thermometer slowly while peering down at Harper with that certain distaste women have for unclothed and unfamiliar men. He secretly hoped the glass had grown hair. "Well, well. Aren't we the healthy one?"

"That's right. I'm fine. In here

for a broken leg. Never felt better. Can't use a thing except a decent meal." It was rapidfire but he got it all in.

"You needn't worry, Mr. Harper. Breakfast is on its way. You'll find plenty of everything. Now try to roll over—it's time for bottom's up."

The nurse squirted a stream onto the floor from a hypodermic needle gleaned from the tray.

"What do you suggest I do with that?" asked Harper pointing to the suspended leg.

"Just lean over as far as you can. And loosen these a bit," she said tugging at his smock. Harper freed the drawstring bow. "There we are. Now please relax. It won't hurt if you relax."

She gave the shot in a jolting, stabbing manner. Luckily Harper had clenched his teeth or he might have bit off the end of his tongue. He could see the nurse's eyes glisten in delight as an age-old revenge was sweetly taken.

"Now that didn't hurt, did it?" she asked as the cotton swab rubbed away a drop of blood.

"No. That didn't hurt at all," said Harper in calmly measured tones.

Her smile remained, plastered on cast-iron features, but he could see her eyes saying, *I'll bet.*

The nurse unloaded several small paper cups containing multicolored pills for Harper to swallow. She then inspected the traction supports to ascertain that they were not blistering the skin.

"Simple fracture like this, why, you should be out of here by tomorrow fit as new."

Harper met the smile head-on and attempted to attain the proper degree of mechanical poise.

"The doctors will be along in a little while to give some more calcium-silicon treatments. Now, if you'll lift yourself up a bit, Mr. Harper—"

"For what?" asked Harper defensively.

"For this," said the nurse in a flurry of motion. The cold bedpan had moved from the cabinet to under him as if by magic. Harper gritted his teeth at the contact. The smile again. "That's what you get for lying to me. Be good, now, or you'll get more."

With that threat she picked up her tray and was gone, *click-clacking* down the hall.

THE other bed in the room was empty but Harper had little time to be lonely. Crowded and overexposed would have been more accurate terms of description. Breakfast arrived and seemed closely followed by dinner. In between he was inundated by several waves of nurses and aides. Harper was washed, relieved, turned a little, combed, rubbed, pilled and needled again. There was an interview by a

records clerk who extracted his life's medical history and those of three previous generations. After that the mop-and-clean-sheet brigade arrived. An insurance agent for the company put in an appearance just to make sure he really existed and interrupted a nice elderly lady trying to sell him magazines. All in all, Harper formed a new opinion as to the cause of relapses.

He was visited twice by a team of doctors that administered the calcium-silicon injections. The treatment fascinated Harper. They used a portable X-Ray device that reproduced continuous images on a remote viewing screen. The plates were attached to a yoke-shaped device that was easily mobile through 360 degrees and allowed a complete view of the fracture. The cementing action of the last injections could be instantly analyzed and this made possible an accurate diagnosis of where the next shots were to be placed. A simple fracture required only twenty-four to thirty-eight hours to repair. Associated tissue that had been bruised or torn required a little longer to heal but still a patient wasn't down more than a week.

As the afternoon slowly lengthened, Harper began to think he was going to enjoy a few moments of peace and quiet. A sudden commotion in the hallway that increased in decibels proved him wrong. An urgent entourage rolled in a patient on an emergency stretcher cart. Harper could see that his roommate was in far more serious trouble than he.

The staff attending the elderly patient moved quickly and smoothly. Conversation was kept to abbreviated phrases as each seemed to sense what the other was doing. This was one of the crack teams from Receiving and none of the usually prevailing hospital mystique clung to them. They ignored the draw curtains between the beds and Harper watched, entranced.

The cart was rolled parallel to the bed and two aides lifted and slid the patient onto the bed in a sweeping flowing motion. A resident doctor and intern assisted from the other side. The aides were pushing the cart from the room as the duty nurse arrived, smile in place. And for the first time Harper could remember, the smile disappeared when she saw the cream-colored knee boots on the patient.

Harper had noticed the boots but thought the patient was still in street clothes. He could see now that the man was not. The nurse started to remove them. The patient, who seemed in shock and a bit out of it, came groggily aware.

"What are you doing, woman? Get away from there. GET AWAY!"

The man's right leg swung up at the nurse and the momentum almost carried him out of bed.

The intern caught the man and lifted him back onto the mattress.

Turning to the nurse, the doctor said furiously, "For God's sake, let those alone."

She recoiled and blinked, "But the sheets—"

"To hell with the sheets." He returned his attention to the patient. "Listen, McKay. Now hear me! You've had a massive stroke. Your left side is paralyzed from your neck on down. You have at least one major obstruction in your brain, maybe more. I've given you shots to attempt to dissolve it—*but you've got to lie still.* Any more of that jumping around and we'll be burying you. You listening?"

"Yeh, I hear you," said the patient whose tone indicated he was highly disturbed by the inconvenience of it all. "But you better tell them girlies to leave my boots alone. None of you ground-hoppers are gonna be able to take them off—not unless I'm dead—and I ain't dead by a long shot. Got to get off this planet and get home, got to—"

The doctor administered a sedative while McKay talked and he and the intern waited until its affect sent the man into a deep sleep. As they started to leave the doctor paused and turned to Harper.

"Hi. Sorry for the commotion."

"It's all right."

"I'd like you to do me a favor. Keep an eye on him for us and if he becomes active or anything, push your emergency light—okay? We may have to strap him down."

"Sure, be glad to," said Harper. "What caused the stroke?"

The doctor shrugged to indicate multiple possibilities, "Probably the results of a drastic change in environment. He's a little too elderly to be taking the physical punishment of a space trip and planetary changes."

"He's a spacer?" asker Harper.

"That's my understanding. His idenity tags say he's a Martian Outmapper. He had a return ticket on him that was sold last month on Mars. An unusual man. But then Outmappers are known for that. I have to rush, so thanks again. It will be a couple of hours before he comes around. So long," said the doctor with a wave of his hand.

"'Bye," said Harper and the room was left to its paying occupants.

HARPER regarded his new roommate with increased curiosity and a certain awe that's inherent in any spectator. McKay was old but strangely aged, as though sections of his body lived at different paces. His torso and legs were huge and seemed muscular, yet his arms were scrawny sticks.

His face was typical of the spacers Harper had seen in passing. It was heavily wrinkled and darkly burned, yet possessing a curiously whitish cast, almost as if the skin were in a constantly accelerated reproduction process. Bulging purplish veins traced eerie lines on the sunken features and pulsed to a steady heartbeat. The only other motion was the rising and falling of an overly distended chest.

The oddly shaped boots protruded from under the blankets and appeared bizarre in the extreme. Their design indicated a rare originality. No stitching or glued seams were visible. The overall effect was almost as if they had been poured to form. Harper wondered about it for a while, until the boredom of the long afternoon sent his thoughts elsewhere.

Activity picked up right after supper as the second-shift nurse arrived to give Harper his antibiotic shot and pain pills. She went about her business with much the same personal detachment as her predecessor. Harper preferred her, though, since she didn't smile at all. Another calcium-silicon treatment was given and the X-rays showed that no more would be required.

Harper sighed his relief as darkness came, knowing that the morning would bring his release. He had just reached over his head to wave on the telescoping bedlamp when he noticed that McKay was awake and watching him.

"Hello," Harper offered. "How are you feeling?"

"Like hell," came the thickly couched reply. "They got any water in this pest hole?"

"Coming up," answered Harper and activated the nurse's station alarm. An aide appeared and attended to McKay's needs which proved to be several. Harper passed the time reading some of the bedside literature donated by various organizations. McKay was extremely weak but managed to drink most of a specially prepared milkshake. The aide tied an emergency light to the guardrail near McKay's right hand and departed after passing chosen words of encouragement.

McKay's usable hand fumbled along the bedside until he found the controls that raised the head section. His eyes seemed to strain until he caught sight of the boots sticking out from under the blankets.

He waved the right toe back and forth for a moment and then asked, "They try to take them off me?"

"Um-hmm." Harper nodded. "But you gave them a bad time."

"Yeh—it figures. Them boots ain't been off in over forty years. Never will either. Bet they don't come off when they haul my carcass away. Them boots are a part of me by now—a part of me."

Harper smiled but he was certain that he had heard only about half of that, "You say you've been wearing them for forty years? They look like new."

The right toe waved back and forth again. "Sure they look new. Hand-made from gimpo hide. Won't wear out—*can't* wear out. They take life back from whatever wears them. Replace themselves like skin."

"I never heard of anything like that," said Harper incredulously.

"No matter," said McKay softly. "There's lots of things people ain't never heard of and probably never will, for that matter. Damn bunch of ground-huggers content to live out their lives in prenatal conditions and scared-to death of expanding their minds."

Harper must have reacted painfully and McKay seemed to realize why.

He immediately added: "Don't take that personal, fellow. I don't mean it personal."

"The name's Raymond Harper."

"Merlanger McKay's mine."

"Glad to know you. One of the doctors who admitted you said he thought you were an Outmapper on Mars—that true?" asked Harper, making conversation.

"I *am* an Outmapper. Just came back to Earth long enough to see some relatives but they've all passed on. Guess I was out there longer than I thought. Damn air down here's got me all messed up. I'll be fine when I get back home. I can live there—shouldn't have left—friends who understand things. This world's harder than I remember—cold and empty—no friends, none who could be—"

HARPER gave a courteous nod occasionally as McKay rambled, falling into reminiscence. Eventually a pause lengthened into silence and Harper thought the Outmapper had drifted off into sleep. But the other continued abruptly.

"What about you? How'd you get slung up like that?"

"Stupidity, mainly. I work for Universal Ores as a construction engineer. Fell off an ore line yesterday afternoon and broke my leg."

"Too bad," said McKay, genuinely sorry. "Your company has mining projects on Mars, too. You ever been up?"

"No. Had the chance but turned it down. The pay was good but I didn't want to leave while my folks were still alive. Maybe that's a way of saying I didn't have the nerve—I don't know. Most of the men I've met returning from a tour say it's pretty harsh duty and very lonely. I'm pretty much a crowd-follower."

"I guess that's about right—the part about its being bad duty. It wouldn't be worth much if you had to stay put on some construction

project, watching camp video reruns. But with a breather, a couple of pairs of outtogs and a gimpo—well, it's tremendous. You know what a gimpo is, don't you?"

Harper shrugged and grinned in a half ignorant way. "I've seen pictures of them. They're the major life form on Mars, aren't they—called the Martian Camel?"

"The major animal form, yes, but there are others. The camel bit sounds like some fool in an office needing words to say. A gimpo is sort of *one* thing, you know? It has a body and four legs but it's all the same thing. No bones or joints or things like that. It's just as if the body runs down in four places to make the legs. There's no neck or head. It was a real shock for me when I saw my first one."

"You mean there's no head at all?"

"Nope. Doesn't need one. About the only head-type feature it needs and has is an eye-like vision hole up between what we call the front pair of legs. Ears, nose and a mouth full of teeth would be a waste of space. They absorb what they need through their hides like we expel from ours. And don't think that didn't give us trouble at first. We tried to ride them and they were peaceful enough but they'd eat the pants right off you in no time. Finally found an oil-based plastic that stayed flexible in the temperature changes that we used for a halter to yoke the front legs. Good halter would only last a couple of months at best."

"Fascinating," said Harper.

"Yeh, I guess it sounds that way now. It wasn't so much then. It was a simple case of life and death. Either you had a gimpo to find water for you out on those ranges or you didn't make it. More like a burro than a camel. I guess we Outmappers were a lot like those old gold prospectors of years ago. More than one man owes his life to that animal—in several ways."

Harper decided that the talking was relaxing McKay and keeping his mind off his predicament. The long sedative-induced sleep seemed to have rested the man completely and he was keeping still, so Harper continued to encourage the conversation.

"How's that?"

"Well, like the time I first discovered a Martian Sanctuary. I'd have walked right into it if that gimpo of mine hadn't gone belly down in the sand. I pulled and kicked but he wouldn't budge. About then. . ."

McKay spun his story freely and Harper could feel himself being drawn into the web. The hospital room took on a glimmer of fog as both men's minds narrowed to the time line, as the one identified with the other and both retraced lost images, the one leading, the other following.

"There is no purpose to abuse of the beast."

The image had spoken behind McKay's back and he spun toward it with one foot still cocked in an undelivered kick. The draped figure of a man confronted McKay from behind a barrier of heat waves. The Martian plateau in coming twilight reflected dimly through the figure and McKay sensed it to be a projection. Still, his only instinct was to flee. The Outmapper clamped down on his fear and stood his ground. There was no place to run without meeting certain death. If it were to come—here was the place to stand or fall.

"Your person is in no immediate danger," the image spoke again in the oddly resonating atmosphere. The thing didn't appear to McKay to move and the sound was almost non-directional. The features were strangely arranged and the clothing unusual, yet there was too much familiarity about it. McKay was certain the thing was for his identification only.

"What do you want?" he asked, unusually calm, considering.

"It is a strange question. This is our home and you are the one who wants something. Still, invader, we wish you no harm. That is why we appear here."

The sound stopped but the message was incomplete. McKay decided to remain silent and wait.

The image raised a wavering arm and indicated in a sweep the land behind it. "All this is sacred ground for our kind. You must consider it forbidden sanctuary. To enter without our consent will result in death."

McKay considered the words as he looked behind the image at the alien landscape. "The land appears no different. I see no indications of boundaries. How am I to know?"

"The beast you use will not cross, nor any after its kind."

"That doesn't help me," said McKay slowly. "I could wander around on my own or get lost maybe."

The image passed an arm behind its back and reappeared holding a pair of boots. It bent forward and set them down outside the wall of shimmering waves. "The coverings are of the beast and live long after the animal itself has died. Wear them and they will become a part of you, forbidden to enter sanctuary. You will also be able to ride the beast unharmed."

The tension of alien contact began to wear on McKay. He could feel his limbs tremble and weaken, his thoughts stuttered. "I don't know—I don't know. . ."

"The other choice," continued the image, "is to leave this place and never return. For the shape of it is irregular and to return would mean death. In time it may be that some among you will be in-

vited to enter and be at peace with the elements. But that shall be our decision and those selected of our choice. Beware."

The image faded and suddenly the lines were gone. The gimpo stood and waited, its fur-covered skin quivering in the desert twilight. McKay slumped down onto the sand and stared at the boots and tried to evaluate the degree of his sanity.

HARPER could feel his mind blink. "So you decided to put them on?"

"Yeh, after a while I did. And it was like he said. For years afterward I would walk into places where I couldn't go any further. It took a long time before I got the area all mapped out—shows on the maps as simply being unexplored."

"Some sort of alien design?"

"Don't know. Just looks like an ink splash on a piece of paper. Probably has a reason, I guess."

"Were you the only one to meet a Martian?" asked Harper.

"Naw, most of us did, sooner or later. There are other sanctuaries. I was the only one that got a free pair of boots, though. The others had to make their own—not that they believed the sanctuary story so much at first—just that they preferred riding to walking."

"Seems strange that you'd prefer to walk or ride rather than use the automatic transportation."

"Eh—Raymond, isn't it? Well, I'll tell you, Raymond, it's like this. You have to be a loner and down on things in general to want to be an Outmapper. You don't want to take much with you that reminds you too much of civilization. Especially some damn machine that's going to break down on you when you're dependent on it. Oh, sure, some tried that approach but almost all of them died up there. I found a wreck one time right up at a sanctuary line. It's no place for a kid and a machine out on a joyride. You got to go it alone on guts and try to get as close to old nature as you can, so you'll have sharp and reliable instincts. And even at that, most Outmappers paid the price in those deserts."

"I suppose Mars is fairly well mapped out by now?"

"Yeh, fairly well. There's still a couple of areas for an old hand like me. If I can ever get out of this place to get home."

It was past eleven and the night shift had come on. The nurse's first round of calls broke up the conversation.

"My, my, aren't we the late ones in here? Come on now, let's be turning in. Mr. Harper? That's you? Yes, I have a shot for you."

She reached up and pulled the curtain shut.

After tending to McKay the nurse left, waving off the lights. Harper lay awake in the darkness for a long time listening to the

Outmapper's regular breathing and thinking about the harmless babblings of the senile old man. Funny how it always happened to the aged. Talk and talk and talk. They'd tell stories for days on end about times long past and none of them would be true—only half being even probable. It seemed to be nature's way of relieving inner frustrations that younger people expelled in more vigorous ways.

Harper's cramping leg finally gave up and went numb. It gave him a chance to drift off into a restless and dream-filled sleep.

A FEELING of gossamer touched Harper while he slept and he jerked awake, all senses alive and functioning. He held his breath and listened for any sound. There was none. Something had happened to awaken him, he was certain. He reached out to the curtains between the beds and drew them back.

McKay's body lay half off the bed, an arm and one foot dangling lifelessly. Harper grabbed the emergency button but knew in the starlight of the bay windows that the Outmapper was dead. A blankness closed in about him and he only faintly remembered strong hands breaking his grip on the emergency cord. The needle's thrust went almost unnoticed and his body fought back the effects of the sedative. He had thoughts to think and nothing could interfere.

Every breath Harper gulped trying to understand the Outmapper's death had a bit of the same mystery in it. They had shared air. They had shared life. McKay's last words played over and over. His image turned and turned. Harper's feelings were his own, locked up in a frozen exterior from which they couldn't be broken loose and shared with anyone. He kept thinking over and over again, Damn, damn, damn, I don't understand. . . why does life have to die. . . why?

Finally, in a stupor, Harper collapsed on his bed, having changed nothing.

THE rattling of trays being unloaded from the breakfast cart in the hallway helped Harper shake off the effects of the sedative and stir awake. He slipped his leg from the traction harness and awkwardly positioned the numb limb on the bed. Soon the shooting pains of returning circulation caused him to roll about in anguish. He was gripping the sides of the mattress when a faintly luminous mark on the floor caught his eye. Then he saw another.

Harper eased himself from the bed and applied slight pressure to the injured leg. Satisfied that it would hold his weight, he stepped to the foot of the bed. A path of faint blobs lead from McKay's bed into the hallway. It looked as

though someone had dribbled a ball laden with powder. Harper limped after them. He ignored the stares of the aides delivering breakfast and tried to follow the prints. They were almost rubbed out. Twice he lost them and picked them up again. They led him through a pair of massive doors out onto a sundeck. Here the prints showed clearly again. They led straight to the rim and ended. Harper stood staring dizzily at the twelve-story drop to the parking lot below.

"Mr. Harper!" It was the smiling nurse. She came bustling out to the sundeck, pushing a wheelchair and was obviously irritated. "You know you shouldn't be up on that leg without the doctor's permission. What are you doing out here anyway? It's time for breakfast. Now sit down and I'll wheel you in—come on now—"

Something inside Harper's mind shut her out and a hush prevailed during the trip back to his room.

He remained in bed until the breakfast tray was delivered. Then he arose again and made his way to the personal lockers behind the doorway. Digging into his trousers he found his pocketknife. Harper liberated a napkin from the tray and kneeled near the clearest print and began scraping it away from the tiles. He scraped up three more before he was satisfied he had procured a reasonable sampling of the stuff. Folding the napkin carefully, Harper returned to his locker and shoved it into a pocket. Then he limped back to bed and breakfast.

The usual rigamarole of check and double check, sign and cosign, pay, insurance and release occupied most of the day for Harper. An hour still remained in Universal Ore's workday when he walked from the hospital, flagged down a 'copter and gave directions to the Company's complex. He arrived at the Metallurgy Lab with a half hour to spare.

"Well, hello there, Gimpy," said John Collins wiping his hands on a chemically stained smock. "They fixed you up awfully fast." The two men shook hands.

"It doesn't take long any more," agreed Harper. "Look, John, I need a small favor under the table. Can you help me out?"

"Sure, if it's within reason."

Harper withdrew the napkin and unfolded it on a counter top. "This is a sampling of something I found on the floor in the hospital and I'd like to know what it is. I don't think it's one of the medicinal type compounds. It was luminous this morning but that seems to have left. It was almost powder before I scraped it up."

Collins looked at the meager scrapings and let out a low whistle, "Boy, there's not much there, Raymond. One little wrong turn and I'll blow the whole sampling. Maybe a spec test can get me

going down the right road—I don't know—there just isn't anything there to work with."

"It's important to me, John, or I wouldn't have asked."

"Sure. . . sure. OK, I'll tell you what. Let me have a try at it and I'll let you know if I come up with anything. Might be the challenge will do me some good." The chemist folded the sampling and placed it in a safe and locked it. "Right now it's closing time. Kid's birthday and I can't be late."

The men said goodbye and parted.

IT TOOK Collins three days. The chemist videoed the line shack and the guard sent a runner down the line to fetch Harper. Collins was smiling broadly on the plate.

"I got that analysis you were asking about, Raymond. Drop around when you can find time."

Harper beamed back. "Good work, John. I'll be there in an hour."

John was waiting for him.

"Right here you are," Collins said and shoved a paper across the counter toward Harper. "I figured you didn't want the floor wax analyzed so I've omitted that."

Harper stared at the page of element signs, formulas and ratios before shaking his head.

"John, I can't make anything out of this."

"It's a perfect sample," said Collins, strutting just a bit as he walked around the table and took back the paper. "Here, look. We broke it down into two groupings. This column is the silicate rock group and this one is the iron group. The groups are at a four-to-three ratio. The rock breaks into percentages of magnesium and various silicate compounds. The iron group is broken down the same way. Here: eighty-nine percent iron, ten percent nickel and about one percent total of elements like titanium, chromium, manganese, cobalt, copper and zinc. See?"

"See what? Does any of this make sense?" asked Harper.

"Sure it does. It's a perfect sampling," Collins repeated.

"Ok, I give. It's a perfect sampling of what?"

"Matter. Just plain matter as we know it. Distributed in a random form of course."

Suddenly thoughts and images veiled behind a reluctant subconscious burst forth onto Harper. He saw a dangling leg, a foot, bare without a boot. The circular indistinct print of a hoofless animal seen in a museum. He felt the muscles set in his face as he heard again the words of choice in sanctuary.

He asked the last question, "Matter?"

"Yeah, man, you know . . . Star Dust." ●

THE HELIX HLEXI LHXIE

The Geoffroy Effect—or never the trains shall meet!

GERARD REJSKIND

ED awoke to the warmth of Julia's arms. The softness of her hair tickled his nose. His unconscious mind had heard the soft hum from his alarm buzzer—it was rapidly growing louder. If he did not reach out to stop it he knew from long habit that its electronic circuitry would resort to other sonic tricks. It did. But Ed, the barely stirring Julia still in his arms, did not move, as the timepiece began to emit chirps that might have come from a cricket in one of the few natural swamps not yet paved over. The chirps sharpened, turned to whistling sounds and became more clearly electronic. Finally the alarm changed to its ultimate persuader—an excellent imitation of the mechanical bells in the old-fashioned clocks used in the first half of the century.

Ed Fontaine shifted Julia toward his left as gently as he could and reached with his right hand to silence the ringing nuisance. Julia moaned, yawned.

"Not already?"

"Time for breakfast."

She opened large blue eyes to him, closed them again, with a stab of annoyance.

"Let's sleep—"

"Can't. They expect me at work."

"You built the Jeffrey Helix—"

"Geoffroy," he corrected her.

"You built it," she said, ignor-

ing his interruption. "You're the only one who understands it. They can't fire you."

It was true, he thought with a half-smile. He had built it—a system that would allow several subway trains to cross a stretch of rail at the same time without colliding.

"That's just it," he said. "I'm responsible for it. And I've got a visitor this morning. Someone who wants to know how I did it."

"Can't he wait?" she asked sleepily, putting warm arms about his midriff.

"Wouldn't look good. The man just might be my next employer."

That was all it took to shake the sleep from her. This time her eyes opened wide and remained wide, like a vast expanse of sky.

"Who? Where is he from? What do you mean—"

"*Who*—is a Mr. Carruthers. *Where*—is from the New York Transit Authority. And I mean that I just might work for him. Or his boss."

"Come on," she said, pulling at his arm gently, "you wouldn't leave Montreal—"

"Not that I want to. But the Geoffroy Helix has been operating perfectly on the Montreal Metro for four years. I've become, at the ripe old age of twenty-nine, an electronic baby-sitter."

She still looked hurt.

"Carruthers is coming from New York because they want one too. They've been talking about a massive expansion of their subway system since traffic came to a complete standstill almost fifteen years ago. But they can't do it the way we've done it—unless they build a Geoffroy Helix."

"Why do they need you for that?"

"You're the one who just told me I was indispensable."

His logic glanced off her. "Who wants to live somewhere where the traffic doesn't move?"

"I," he said, kissing her nose, "can change that."

OVER waffles and coffee—prepared automatically by a microwave oven—she took up the subject again. "Are you taking me with you if you go to New York?"

"I thought you didn't want to go," he said between bites of the slightly spongy synthetic waffle. Development of the soft flour by a large plastics firm ten years earlier had been the final death-blow to the rural economy of both the Canadian west and the American midwest. Food made from the soft flour was more nutritious than the real thing, though—like this waffle—it was often boringly consistent in texture.

"New York," she said, "is a nice place to visit—" The rest was inaudible through the ersatz waffle.

"But why don't you want to live there?" he asked with a smile.

She finished the waffle, and grew more serious. "Perhaps I would—if it's what you really want. I know you're bored with the same old Helix every day. But I think you should go only for a little while. And then come back to Montreal."

"Sure. After all, the New York Helix will some day be four years old, too."

"It'll take me some time to get used to it."

"Look," said Ed, "I haven't seen this fellow Carruthers yet. I'll show him the Helix. We'll see if he likes it—and if he thinks New York might want the man who built it."

She looked unconvinced.

"Tell you what," he said. "We'll talk about it tonight, after I've seen Carruthers. I'll take you to that little seafood place we like in Old Montreal. Come down to my office at six and we'll paint the town."

"Paint it?" She looked sad. "Say goodbye to it you mean."

DON CARRUTHERS had been with the New York Transit Authority as an electronic engineer for longer than ten years. He was in his early forties and he did not conceal his surprise that his Montreal counterpart was more than a decade younger.

"Inventors come young in Canada," he said in the tone of a man to whom a smile comes easily.

"Inventor," said Ed Fontaine, "is perhaps the wrong word. A development engineer is really all I am."

Carruthers raised a bushy eyebrow. "But no one else knows how to build a Geoffroy Helix."

"No. That is, Léopold Geoffroy did. But as you probably know he died about three years ago."

"Did he tell you how to build this one?"

Ed explained. "In a way. I wrote my college thesis on the Geoffroy effect. In that thesis I suggested that the effect could be used to let two or more subway trains cross at the same level. When I graduated I sent a copy of the thesis, with the application underlined in red, to the Montreal Transportation Commission. They bit and asked me to do a technical study on the effect."

"Léopold Geoffroy himself helped you, I understand."

"Yes. The MTC brought him from France. And it was really he who worked out the mathematics behind the hardware I merely designed."

"That hardware," said Carruthers, "is what I came to find out about."

"You've read technical papers on the Geoffroy effect?" asked Ed.

"I have. And frankly it didn't make a damned bit of sense."

"THIS is the Geoffroy Helix," Ed Fontaine and Don Carruthers stood before the huge control panel. It glowed with indicator lamps. Carruthers looked to the right, at three rows of shiny blue equipment racks.

"Run by a computer, I see."

"Two computers," said Ed. "The Helix is pretty complicated, and we don't want a circuit failure to foul things up. The computers are paralleled through an *AND* gate. They check on each other."

"Nice." Carruthers turned his attention to the imposing panel before him. "This, I take it," he said, waving at the blinking lights, "tells you where the subway trains are."

"Only the ones in the vicinity of the Helix," said Ed. "When a train takes a tunnel leading to the Helix, sensors pick up its presence, the computers make sure the route is clear for it and operate the circuitry to take it into the Helix and out the other side. Here, for instance—" he pointed to a trio of lights on the panel—"we have a train approaching the Helix southbound on line six. These two trains—" he pointed again—"are within the Helix. They're doing the seemingly impossible. They're crossing the same space without being aware of each other. Now the second train is out of the Helix and the first train has entered."

"Impressive. But does it really get traffic around faster?"

"It does. All but three of our eleven lines cross at the Helix." Ed turned to a map. "The Helix is here. And Berri-de-Montigny station is here, just next to it. From that station you can depart in any of sixteen different directions. You can get almost anywhere in town by Metro, taking no more than two trains."

Ed paused to let the significance sink in. "If you built an eight-line interchange, putting one line above the other, some passengers might have to climb up or down as far as twenty stories to change trains. It would take them all day."

"You could rig traffic lights—to let the trains through an ordinary interchange one at a time."

"And an Irish cop with a whistle," suggested Ed.

Don Carruthers laughed with ebullient humor.

BY MID-AFTERNOON the two men were in shirtsleeves and Don Carruthers was laboring with a branch of mathematics he had scarcely touched since university days. He was still well up on basic calculus, as he had to be. But this was calculus of a different order and his brain wearied rapidly before the pages of equations.

"Thirty-two simultaneous equa-

tions, all with five-fold iterated integrals," said Carruthers. "You solved these in your head, of course."

"Me and five-million other people," said Ed. "We used a computer, naturally. We went down to MIT and borrowed a sixth-generation computer they'd just built. First we stopped off in New York and got a smaller computer to work out the program for the big one."

"I believe it. But equations, even thirty-two of them, don't make a theory."

"They did for Léopold Geoffroy."

"And for you, by the look of it. You really earned your degree with that thesis."

"Oh, I didn't solve the whole thing in my thesis. I extended the theory enough to suggest applications. It was only when the MTC hired me that the real fun began."

"If I understand all this correctly," said Carruthers at length, "the subway trains don't really go through each other, as everyone thinks."

"Right. They go around each other. But they don't do it in the usual way—over-and-under, say. They do it in another dimension."

"Time?"

"I don't know. And I don't think Léopold Geoffroy knew. Geoffroy's point was that we didn't need to wait until we understood dimension in order to deal with it mathematically. Mathematics can deal with a hundred—a thousand—dimensions all at once. The math just gets complicated. And Geoffroy theorized that if you can deal with a problem mathematically you can use that mathematics to give you a physical solution. Geoffroy did the math. He and I together did the physics. Come, I'll show you the first machine built to test the Geoffroy effect."

THE machine was much smaller than Carruthers had expected. It occupied no more than two equipment racks. Its small control panel held only a power switch and two buttons, marked respectively *operate* and *release*.

On the floor was a small metal chute with a half-inch wide groove down its length. The chute, on its way to the floor, passed through a black metal tunnel, connected to the racks by a large cable.

"It looks like a toy I used to roll marbles down when I was a kid," said Carruthers.

"That's what it is," said Ed Fontaine. "Watch."

He flipped the power switch to *on*, and a faint hum filled the room. He took a marble from a drawer, brought it to the top of the chute and released it. It slid down through the black tunnel and to the floor.

"How many points?" asked Carruthers.

"The points come for the next trick—Geoffroy's trick," said Ed.

He slid a black plate through a slit in the tunnel, so that it blocked the chute. Then once again, he released the marble from the top of the chute. It rolled down and into the tunnel, striking the metal plate audibly.

"It's stuck," said Carruthers.

"Not for long."

Ed pressed the *operate* button, paused momentarily, and then pressed the *release* button. The marble continued its journey down the chute, as though the plate were not there.

Carruthers' jaw fell.

Ed Fontaine could not repress his smile. He scooped up the marble and repeated the operation. This time the marble did not even pause on its way through the tunnel.

"It went right through a metal plate," said Carruthers, awed by the concrete demonstration of what had been only equations.

"Not through. Around."

"In a fourth dimension—"

"A fourth and a fifth," said Ed. "To get the Helix effect, you need two extra dimensions. Suppose a straight line represents the three dimensions that we know. That metal plate would be just a dot, blocking that line. What the marble did was leave the straight line entirely and spiral around it."

"Like a helix?"

"Its path is helix-shaped—hence the name. It's a bit like modulating an AM transmitter, except that you're modulating in two parameters at once."

"And," said Carruthers, still awed, "you're modulating a solid object instead of a carrier."

When the two men returned to Ed Fontaine's office, a phone call was waiting for Ed. It was Julia.

"Are you on your way to New York yet?" she asked, with a hint of moroseness.

"I've just shown our guest the Geoffroy effect," he told her, by way of an answer.

"Keeping our date?"

"Absolutely. Six o'clock. We'll do the sights." Julia wanted to know what dress to wear. "Wear the long gold one I like," he told her. "We might go dancing after dinner."

"Wife?" asked Carruthers, after Ed had hung up.

"Fiancée," said Ed. "I'm trying to console her." He hesitated. "She's upset because she knows you're looking at the Helix and she thinks you might—ah—be looking at me, too."

Carruthers nodded. "No doubt about it. You did your thesis on this thing and I'm too rusty on the math. Besides, you've already built one. We'd want you for a while at least."

There were other details to discuss and here Carruthers was on

his own territory. What did building a Helix involve from the engineering standpoint, he wanted to know. How big was it? What was it made of? Carruthers blanched when Ed told him how much copper was inside the Helix.

"Do you know how much copper costs these days? Can't we economize? Say, by using gold?"

"Silver should work pretty well."

"Glad you're being reasonable," said Carruthers. "What the hell! The Transit Authority plans to blow so much on new subway lines that we could line the Helix with platinum and they wouldn't notice."

By the time the two men put down their papers the summer sun was showing the reddishness of afternoon's end. Ed Fontaine instantly thought again of Julia, slim and beautiful, with eyes bluer than the eastern sky outside his window. She was coming soon.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I'll show you the Helix itself."

"I don't suppose you can walk into it?" asked Carruthers, his interest still alight after the long day.

"No. You can just see trains go in and out. But that's worth the fare by itself."

"One thing I don't understand," said Carruthers. "Geoffroy was French. Why didn't the Paris subway system get its own Helix?"

"Good question. But remember that Paris, unlike Montreal, already had Metro lines just about everywhere. Besides, Geoffroy wasn't taken seriously in his own country. He was a biochemist, not a physicist. And he had retired by the time he wrote his paper on the Geoffroy effect in nineteen-seventy-seven. A lot of people thought he was dotty."

"So you discovered him, really?"

"I discovered a use for his theory. There are probably others."

"There's too damn much specialization nowadays," said Carruthers. "Let a man step a little way out of his narrow field and people—"

Bells....

The clanging of emergency bells cut through the corridors and the offices like a wrecker's hammer. Ed Fontaine knew that they were not real bells, but computers reproducing what they had been told bells should sound like. But in the imitation, they had made the bell-sound even more strident and shrill than the original. And these ersatz bells meant what bells had meant for centuries.

Trouble.

Ed leaped up and ran out of his office in the direction of the Helix, several hundred feet away. Don Carruthers, the bells awakening the same instinct within him, followed only slightly more slowly.

THREE technicians were already in the Helix room. The

huge red emergency light was glowing brightly.

"We've lost a train," said a technician as Ed entered. "It's in the Helix. And it won't come out."

Ed quickly surveyed the huge board. The indicators indeed showed one train still within the Helix. It was southbound, he saw, from Henri-Bourassa, on one of the original lines, built just before Expo '67, two decades before. At the entrance to the Helix, trains were waiting on all lines.

"No chance of a collision?" asked Don Carruthers, behind him.

"No. By now, the computers will have turned on red lights in all tunnels leading to the Helix."

Precious seconds ticked by. One technician left the glowing panel to step to a rack and push what must have been a reset button for the bells. The computers' exaggerated ringing stopped, though the emergency light continued to glow silently. The quiet seemed more awful than the clangor of the bells.

Ed walked to the big panel. He dialed a number on a device not unlike the dials that had adorned telephones as recently as ten years before. He pushed a button.

Nothing happened.

He repeated the operation twice, three times. But the three indicator lights continued to show the train inside the Helix. Don Carruthers walked up to the panel.

"It has never broken down in four years," Ed said almost inaudibly.

Carruthers touched his arm. "Look, I don't want to be a stranger at the wrong time, I—"

"No, don't go. You're no stranger to the Helix now. You might as well see it when it's not working."

In the next few minutes Ed tried several tactics. He bypassed the Helix controls and asked the twin computers, with a hastily drawn-up Cobol program, to release the train on line two, southbound. The computer teleprinter typed out the word TILT. It had been initially programed to write that word, Ed knew; when an error had been made in a program. He checked his program for a flub, couldn't find one and began writing another, calling for a different operations sequence.

The switchboard operator came in.

"MTC head office on the line," she told Ed. "They want to know what we're going to do about the breakdown."

Ed looked at his watch. Only twenty-two minutes had elapsed since the bells had sounded. It had seemed like three times as long.

"Tell them," he said, "to get everything with wheels out there on the road. There must be a half-million people still stranded downtown."

Ed completed his second program and fed it to the computers

once more. The teleprinter came to life in seconds.

TILT.

A third program, more like the first.

TILT, YOU DINGALING.

It was the phrase they had been told to print, to mock anyone unfortunate enough to make errors in three successive programs. It had seemed funny when Ed had first programed them.

"Why," he asked through clenched teeth, "can't I get it right?"

"I think you are doing it right," said Carruthers. "You're just asking the computers to do something they can't do."

Ed protested. "But they can do it. They're in charge. They run the Helix."

"Using what they know of the train positions," said Carruthers. "I'll bet you've programed them to keep two trains from colliding, no matter what."

"Of course."

"That means," said Carruthers, "that the computers won't take orders about when to release a train. In fact, they don't even recognize such instructions. They assume you made a mistake in the program and give you the thumbs-down sign."

THE telephone call was for Ed. At the other end was the chairman of the MTC, red-hot, wanting to know what was going on. It was bad enough that the entire Metro—save the three lines not using the Helix—was paralyzed. But the reporters were down his neck, wanting details on what radio and television were already calling the biggest traffic tieup in Monteal history. Worse, one of the sharper newsmen had already dug up the rumor that a train was missing in the Helix.

"Get that train out!" was the order. Ed knew that the MTC chairman had never been enamored of the Helix project. He had agreed to its construction only because the mayor had insisted.

•

"LOOK," said Carruthers, "I know this is probably a ridiculous idea. But what would happen if you just turned the Helix off?"

"I don't know. We've never tried it because of the danger. It might work. Or it might lose us the train forever."

"You said it was a bit like modulating an AM transmitter. If you shut off the signal to the transmitter the signal returns to the baseline. For the train that would mean home."

"True," said Ed. "But if you shut the power off on the transmitter, the carrier doesn't return to its starting point. It vanishes."

There was a brief silence before Carruthers said, "Why not try it on your model Helix?"

The two men stared at each other. Without a word they marched to the room where the little Helix, with its marble chute, was kept. Ed snapped on the power switch. He waited for a few seconds, then released the marble from the top. He operated the two buttons in sequence and the marble seemed to roll through the steel plate to the floor.

"Now—" said Ed. He released the marble again, but this time pushed only the *operate* button. The marble rolled into the tunnel and vanished. Ed placed his finger on the power switch. "Here goes nothing." He pushed the switch to *off*.

Nothing happened.

On. Off. On. Still nothing. Ed pushed the *release* button. The marble did not reappear. He pushed the *operate* and *release* buttons again, with no result. He reached for a Robertson screwdriver and removed the screws holding the cover of the black tunnel. He removed the cover, exposing the entire chute. The steel plate was there.

But the marble was not.

The two men returned to the Helix room, the telephone operator was back on the line.

"Some reporters to see you, Mr. Fontaine."

"Tell them to go see the brass at head office," Ed told her.

"They say they did so, sir. And they were told to come see you."

It figured. The MTC head was going to see him and the Helix project tarred and feathered.

"I don't want to talk to them. Tell them—" He thought for a moment. "Tell them that a breakdown has taken place in the Helix. One train has been stranded but we hope to get it out soon."

"Think you can?" asked Carruthers when he had cradled the receiver.

"God knows."

Ed felt suddenly how much younger and less experienced he was than his New York visitor. He was used to pressure of a certain kind—the kind generated by taking on a project that no one else believed would work. And his self-assurance had stood him in good stead, especially when he had talked the city of Montreal into letting him, a raw graduate, spend millions to test a wild theory. But he was not accustomed to the knowledge that the lives—or possible deaths—of thousands depended on him. Don Carruthers had faced such crises often during his ten years with the NYCTA. Ed himself might have gained such experience, had he not been in charge of a project which had worked with eerie perfection. Until today.

He looked at his watch. Five minutes to seven. Almost an hour and a quarter had elapsed since the train had vanished into the Helix. And he stood no closer

to a solution than he had before the bells had begun to ring.

Five to seven.

Julia had been due at his office at six.

He walked to the switchboard operator's desk. "Has my fiancée been here asking for me?"

"No, Mr. Fontaine."

"I was expecting her at six."

"She probably couldn't get through," she said. "The Metro's not working and you can't get a cab for love or money tonight."

It was true, Ed knew. He stepped to a telephone and punched out Julia's familiar number. He let the soft electronic *whirr* sound ten times before he replaced the receiver. She probably couldn't get through the traffic, he repeated to himself.

Yet . . .

Yet she hadn't called to let him know. The omission was uncharacteristic of exact, punctual Julia. A chill caught his heart. He turned again to the switchboard operator.

"What was the exact time of the accident?"

"Five-thirty-nine in the afternoon, according to the operations center. Train seven-three had just picked up passengers at Sherbrooke station before entering the Helix."

And before that, Ed thought, it had stopped at Mont-Royal station. Among the passengers boarding might have been Julia. Julia, bound for downtown to meet him. To paint the town.

SOMEONE had sent for pizza and someone else had dragged a microwave coffeepot from a drawer. The device was not large, but it could brew coffee six times faster than the old heating-element coffee-makers. The coffee less than great, thought Ed, but it was what he needed. He turned down the pizza.

Twelve hours had passed—no more than twelve hours, since he had awakened with Julia's soft hair in his eyes. He remembered how upset she had been at the thought of leaving Montreal. New York had seemed far away to her. But how much farther away was she tonight? Where were Léopold Geoffory's extra two dimensions? Geoffroy himself hadn't cared. It had been enough for him that the dimensions existed in the world of mathematics—and that the mathematics corresponded to some sort of physical reality. And he, Ed Fontaine, had agreed with Geoffroy that it was unnecessary to have a subjective notion of just what the physical reality was.

But now things had gone wrong. And suddenly it was vitally important to know where the Geoffroy dimensions lay.

Ed walked, slowly, back into the Helix room. The emergency lights and the lights indicating

the train in the Helix still glowed. He fingered the controls again, ordering the Helix to disgorge its prey—with the same results as before. It was then that Ed noticed Don Carruthers, his tie loosened and his jacket off, working at a table in a corner. Ed could see that Carruthers had before him a sheaf of equations for the Geoffroy effect. And he had made copious notations on some sheets of paper.

"Ideas?" Ed asked.

"Yes."

"Don't keep them to yourself."

"I've come to an inescapable conclusion," said Carruthers. He paused dramatically.

"Léopold Geoffroy should have stuck to his biochemistry."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that the Geoffroy effect is a lot of hooey."

"But it works," protested Ed.

"Yeah? Make it work now."

Ed remembered his mathematical superiority over the older man and he felt a twinge of resentment.

"I've gone over the theory again," continued Carruthers, indicating the papers. "What Geoffroy describes mathematically is a five-dimensional Helix, established and maintained by a giant electrical field."

"Yes—so?"

"So, when you cut the power to an electrical field, it collapses. That means the marble should have reappeared in your baby Helix when you cut the power."

"But it didn't."

"It didn't," said Carruthers, "because Geoffroy was wrong. When was the last time you played with an ordinary oscilloscope?"

"Back in my undergrad days, I suppose," replied Ed.

"You should do it more often. You'll learn things. Now if you use the 'scope in the ordinary way, you insert a signal into the x axis to get vertical deflection and the y axis to get horizontal deflection of the dot on the screen. Now many 'scopes, in the back, have a third input, corresponding to a z axis."

"To deflect the electron beam in a third direction," said Ed, "in and out of the screen."

"The hell!" shouted Carruthers. "Sure you treat that beam *mathematically* as though it moved in a third dimension. But what does it really do?"

"It—it cuts off."

"Damn right. It doesn't go into the surface of the oscilloscope screen. It just goes away."

"But it comes back."

Carruthers shook his head. "No it doesn't. That's another electron beam, a different stream of electrons. You call it the same beam because it appears where you'd expect the vanished beam to reappear. That's what's wrong with confusing mathematics and physics. Just because

there appears to be a correspondence between your equations and reality, you assume that the correspondence is perfect."

"If I understand," said Ed, "you don't believe the Geoffroy Helix really exists."

"And it doesn't. Your baby Helix," said Carruthers, "didn't swing the marble around in some unknown dimensions to get it around that steel plate. *It destroyed that marble*! And it built a copy of it on the other side."

"That's ridiculous."

"That's why the marble vanished when you turned off the power. The circuit forgot how to duplicate the lost marble."

The silence was long before Ed spoke. "If you're right—people taking a train through the Helix never really come back. What comes back is a clever electronic imitation, with a copy of their features a copy of their newspaper—"

"And counterfeit money in their pockets," added Carruthers.

"Then how do we get the Helix to build us a new train just like the old one?"

"Repair the fault in the Helix circuitry."

"But we can't do that without shutting it down. And if we do—"

Carruthers nodded grimly. Ed thought again of Julia, a nonexistent Julia—vaporized earlier in the evening—of whom only his own electronic creation held the blueprint. The thought remained in his mind as he gazed at the Helix panel. And so it happened that he was watching at the precise moment that three lights blinked on, indicating that a train had left the Helix and was

pulling into Berri-de-Montigny station—three hours late.

NO DESCRIPTION can do justice to the moments of jubilation that followed, as news of the train's return spread through the building. Ed himself felt a relief that all but brought tears to his eyes. He felt too jubilant to take seriously what happened next.

The switchboard operator, working well beyond her normal quitting time, phoned him.

"There's a man at my desk," she announced. "He says the Martians have landed!"

Ed might have responded to such an announcement with laughter at the best of times. But now, following the tension of the evening and the sudden relief, he roared. The laughter bubbled out of him, filling the Helix room with peals of loud and merry sound. Martians? They were all he needed to end the day right. He was still laughing when a technician rushed in.

"It's true!" the technician cried. "I saw one outside—"

Ed's laughter died. Something in his mind clicked and instantly he knew there would indeed be strange beings outside. There were no more surprises in the words he heard swirling about him.

"Somebody said they came out of the Berri Metro . . . "

"They're almost like people but purplish and wrinkled, like anteaters . . . "

"There are hundreds . . . "

Ed brushed past the others toward the front door. A cold terror crept up from the base of his spine. And over the terror were the thoughts of his cool, scientific mind. He did not scream as he saw the anteater-like beings. He knew. Carruthers had been right. The Helix was no helix at all. It destroyed and reconstituted them from memory. But its memory was limited. It remembered by repeating the message, over and over, to itself . . .

How many times had it repeated the blueprint of the missing train in three hours? And how accurately?

Not Martians! Commuters—as remembered in a story that has been repeated again and again and again . . . Human beings remembered by an inhuman machine that had been forced to remember too long.

And Ed's horrified brain knew what he was seeing. One of the pathetic, shuffling creatures—its snout dripping with a nameless fluid, its purplish, wrinkled head covered in long matted hair—had blue eyes. It wore a gold-colored robe.

Ed Fontaine sank to his knees, mouthing the word that was to become an unending scream.

"Julia . . . " •

A SLIGHT DETOUR

Earth was out of bounds, but Radnor from the stars had a job to do!

RICHARD E. PECK

RADNOR felt a powerful urge to sleep. No reason not to. The prisoner was securely bound. Sleep for a few moments. What would it matter? Sleep, and dream of homecoming. He had earned it. A short nap. Lovely sleep. Quiet and peaceful. Quiet and sleepy. Quiet . . .

No! He bolted erect and scrubbed the back of his hand across sagging eyelids, trying to fight the languor that melted his insides. He stumbled and grabbed the command cot stanchions to steady himself. His blurry vision cleared as he shook off his torpor and scanned the cramped cabin—and understood. Sitting behind the plastocene psi-shield, his prisoner,

Kern, smiled sardonically and raised his eyebrows.

"Nice try," Radnor said. "But not this time."

He shivered inwardly and felt much less confident than he tried to appear. What power Kern must possess! He had entered Radnor's mind, nearly hypnotizing him without even gaining his conscious attention—and through a psi-shield at that. But Radnor hadn't made First Bailiff by being careless, or weak, or easily deceived. Complete this assignment successfully and he would get his final promotion to Division Chief. No more lonely transport trips from Melan's correction block to the psi-test asteroid in its isolated corner of the galaxy.

Be cautious, he told himself. *Kern is special...*

But then, so was Radnor. No one in the Bailiff Corps tested so high in survival potential; few had the danger instinct he possessed, a touch of undefined psi that had made him the logical choice as Kern's transport guard. If anyone was a logical choice.

Even the medicos on Melan were unable to define the extent of Kern's abilities. He was unusual —that much they knew—perhaps even unique. More precise definition could wait until the specialists took over when Radnor dropped him at the psi-test center (*when*—he refused to think *if*).

He had studied Kern's scanty dossier carefully before accepting the assignment. He knew Kern as well as anyone could, but that knowledge did not include understanding. How a man could delight in violence and motiveless treachery was beyond understanding. Yet Kern did. Irrefutable evidence lay recorded in his dossier; interference with public communication networks, for no reason; several murders, all unexplainable in rational terms; fantastic public escapades, such as his somehow forcing the Melanian governor's wife to disrobe at the height of the Spring Renewal Rites, just as the priests had begun the most solemn of absolutions. Though Kern's powers were as yet undefined, his insanity was clear.

For reasons the medicos were still trying to explain, instability and abnormal psi-powers always seemed mental partners. Paranoids are often merely perceptives in a limited way, gleaning from the thoughts of those around them only the violence and hatred that remain subliminal in healthy minds. The poltergeist phenomenon occurs only in the presence of the psi-gifted and aberrant who recognize neither of those traits in themselves. But the proportions of psi-power and instability vary with the individual. Most of the precogs or telepaths on Melan—a minute proportion of the populace—were merely eccentric. Because they devoted their skills to

socially beneficial ends, people ignored their eccentricities. And when extreme psi-gifts combined with the self-awareness of social deviation, the most fully gifted usually drove themselves into a kind of self-induced catatonia; they were thus no problem.

YET there was Kern. Undoubtedly the strongest gift ever recorded in Melanian medical history, his powers had led to insanity but not to self-censure. If the word "anti-social" had any absolute meaning, it meant "Kern." Radnor had formulated a theory about it after reading the dossier, but the medicos had refused to listen. Kern was still a child, no matter his physiological age. That had to be it. In some corner of the quagmire that might be called Kern's mind lurked a malevolent child, a demonic imp who delighted in grotesque pranks and lacked any touch of the most rudimentary conscience.

But Radnor's theory had not prepared him for meeting his prisoner. He had found Kern cradled in a body-rack behind the silver-wired grid of a psi-shield, where the medicos had strapped him after capturing him in his sleep. Radnor's gorge rose at the memory: a huge lizard exuding its fetid saurian stench, its abdomen ripped open to display the swarming, bloody mass of twisted intestines, had greeted him with a wordless, keening cry. For a moment. Then the raucous laugh that was really Kern had echoed through the ship and the lizard had faded from sight to reveal Kern sitting there behind his pleased smirk. Just as he sat now.

He was handsome, Radnor admitted, though he disliked finding anything about the prisoner he could admire—close-cropped blond curls, brilliant, almost electric, blue eyes; Kern looked like a tri-di of the All-Man, which Radnor had seen so many times floating above the altar in every Melanian temple.

Handsome was not an adequate word. Commanding, charismatic, dynamic—all of these came nearer the mood Radnor felt laving over his thoughts as he stared at the prisoner.

But even as he stared, he knew that Kern might look nothing at all as he now appeared, for that was the distinctive mark of the man's powers: as far as the medicos had been able to establish, Kern wasn't precog, showed no evidence of telepathic or telekinetic powers, lacked most of the usual abilities one expected to find. He was instead a chameleon, able to change appearance at will. No one knew whether he literally changed form or only seemed to. Even in sleep his features shifted slightly. What inconclusive physiological examinations the medicos had been able to perform proved

nothing. If anyone touched him he shimmered through a whole range of shapes, occasionally human, more often animal. A psi-shield damped that ability but could not cancel it out, proof in itself of the man's powers.

Radnor was not even certain of Kern's sex; he had seen him once as a provocative nude girl, motioning toward him and pleading with wordless sounds. But that had been moments after takeoff. Then Radnor had been fresh, wary, not as strangely tired as he now felt. The deceit had failed—intellect overcoming what his glands had urged—and had even served as a memorable warning. With the long journey from Melan to the psi-test center still ahead, he had tried to avoid looking at Kern, except when feeding him. They had a month together in the tiny ship and Radnor was determined to see his cargo safely in the hands of the psi-specialists. Let them figure Kern out.

Still, this current resemblance between Kern and the All-Man was uncanny, even if it were merely a momentary shape Kern had assumed. The fact that the likeness was so striking argued a logical mind underlying the transfomation. The dossier spoke of Kern's totally random behavior. Radnor no longer accepted that evaluation; Kern obviously chose his disguises carefully, could calculate intended effect and was therefore even more dangerous than the medicos knew. Radnor stared at the bronzed, muscular form straining at the bonds behind the shield. How could such foulness appear so outwardly benign?

He snorted at his own maudlin feelings and recognized unbidden sympathy coursing through him. He knew better than to become involved with a prisoner; all bailiffs knew better. His job was merely to capture if necessary, to transport, but not to judge. Let the medicos examine and cure Kern. It was none of his business, no matter how curious he might be. But how, for example, could Kern sit immobile for hours at a time?

Radnor stared. A slight haze swept over Kern's features, defocusing him momentarily. Could he be in the act of shifting to some new form? Radnor peered more closely, unable to look away, fascinated by what the next few moments might show him. A faint noise at his back irritated him; something was interfering with his concentration. He swept an angry hand over his face and drew it away in shock. He was drenched—perspiration was pouring down his forehead.

He glanced away from Kern to the soaked palm or his own hand and as he did he saw—out of the corner of his now distracted eye—that the prisoner's body rack was empty! He quickly looked

back to see Kern in place, still immobile, but shimmering and insubstantial. *A trick...* the thought hit him.

A faint shadow waving. A sound behind him. Then Kern struck.

Radnor fell heavily to the deck at the explosion inside his skull. Calling on every scintilla of concentration, he hung grimly onto consciousness and lurched upright to one knee. He turned toward the pain in time to glimpse a huddled figure hurling itself into the escape capsule. Then the airlock iris cycled and Kern was gone. Radnor gave in to unconsciousness.

HE FOUND himself kneeling beside the control console, one hand already on the scanner switch. Trying to ignore the pounding inside his head, he crawled onto the command cot and simultaneously activated the scanners. Through luck—or some instinct Radnor couldn't name—Kern had chosen the right instant to effect his escape. The capsule plummeted toward Sol Three, the only habitable planet in that system and the nearest possible hiding place. So the man did have a touch of the telepath in him, after all; he was clearly acting on Radnor's knowledge.

Radnor thought of his Division Chief's reaction. There went the Bailiff Corps' proud reputation, flitting away because of his inattention—no escapes in over two centuries—and now this. Worse, Kern was making straight for an interdicted system and its primitive world. There was no telling what a disruptive force he might prove. And to demonstrate space flight to primitives! The potential culture shock was inconceivable. All societies lacking atomic power—Sol Three among them—were under automatic interdiction.

Radnor hesitated only a moment. For atmosphere entry alone, he might well be busted from the Corps, his career as Bailiff ruined. But if Kern escaped!

He refused to consider it. He locked his tracer beam on the capsule growing smaller every second in the ship's scanners, and offered up a small prayer of apology as his ship dove lower, dragging down Radnor's future with it.

Kern headed for the nightside, arching toward the northern atmosphere. Radnor closed the gap. The escape capsule lacked the speed to lose its pursuer, but its lead now looked insurmountable. Radnor pushed his ship to the limits of safe entry velocity—not enough. He switched from praying to cursing—perhaps less effective but certainly more satisfying—and reached beneath the command cot for his huntpack, which he checked quickly as the ship blazed its way into the heavy atmosphere. Tranquilizer darts; stunner, fully charged; shiplink

beacon; pitons and elastisteel line; the pouch of diamonds, acceptable exchange anywhere in the known universe, though Radnor planned never to be in the position of having to contact a native for anything so risky as face-to-face trading; infrared beam and goggles; concentrated food for several days; psi-detector; and the force-field of the pack casing itself—everything in place and operational.

He flipped the bow scanner to full magnification and watched the capsule heading for the lower tip of a huge lake which glimmered flat in the light of Sol Three's single moon. Then he saw the rockets flare as the capsule blasted against gravity's pull and settled to a thundering crash near the lake. The capsule, unlike Radnor's ship, lacked anti-grav and depended for landing upon simple thrust engines, a fact that now gave Radnor a target, a spot glowing orange-blue in the night. He slowed to land near the flames licking around the capsule's touchdown point, only to freeze in momentary horror. A scant five thousand meters above the surface, he saw below him row upon row of faint lights winking in the darkness. Kern had landed in the midst of a settlement.

Radnor reacted quickly, allowing the automatics to seek out a clear area and waft his ship gently to the surface. Full refrigeration cooled the ship's hull as it descended and Radnor waited for anchored stability before cycling the exterior hatch.

He peered cautiously at his surroundings. Through the goggles now fitted close over his eyes he watched the pool of infrared from his helmet beam illuminate the ground around him. His ship sat beside a squat building some eight meters high, only slightly shorter than the ship itself. On all sides similar buildings reared their crude shapes in the darkness, all apparently of unpainted, wooden construction, all approximately square. They presented a little problem. He spun the rheostat which controlled the ship's surface spectrum until a shrill whine sounded in his ears. He locked the rheostat. His ship now matched the surrounding buildings in color and apparent texture. In the dark—he fervently hoped—no one would notice. And he would be gone by morning.

He gritted his teeth. He *would* be gone by morning!

His last airborne glimpse of the capsule's impact area had told him that less than a kilometer separated him from his quarry. He moved in that direction, huddling close to the wooden buildings as he did. A brief check of his ship-link beacon reassured him. It homed on the disguised ship and would serve to lead him back, should he become disoriented in these unfamiliar surroundings.

He located a street which led toward the flames now lighting the night sky, the point of Kern's touchdown. He stepped tentatively forward, then ducked back as two men passed in animated conversation. He understood nothing of what they said—nor did he plan to spend the hours necessary to learn their language through the ship's translator banks—but their agitation was clear. They pointed toward the fire and broke into a quick trot.

Others joined them, boiling out of the small buildings which lined the dirt street buildings all square, all squat, all nondescript. At least one problem had solved itself: the people's garments were not particularly unusual, most of them two-piece arrangements of shirt and trousers. The women wore long skirts which swept the dusty board sidewalks. Radnor decided his neutral gray coverall would pass, at least in the dark. And happily not all the men he saw were bearded.

He stowed the goggles and infrared beam back in his pack; gas lanterns spotted at intervals along the winding street provided sufficient light.

Keeping apart from the crowd which milled down the length of the street, he followed quickly. Then a strange clamor drove him into a doorway where he waited tense. A steaming boiler drawn by four large quadrupeds rattled past. The clanging noise sounded from a large bell mounted atop the boiler, shaken by one of the men who clung recklessly to the side of the careening cart. It looked to be some sort of steam pump, though Radnor wasn't certain. But now he knew why this world was laid under interdict. Apparently it lacked even internal combustion engines, let alone atomic power. He thought once more of his pending promotion and sighed. If he got out of this mess without being discovered...

He covered nearly a kilometer before reaching the fire. It had already spread to several buildings along the riverfront but seemed to be under control. Fire fighters concentrated on containing the flames, spraying water on the surrounding buildings.

He couldn't approach the center of the blaze, not with the crowd gathered between him and the light, so he contented himself with trying to understand the crowd's behavior. Every few moments a man or boy would burst through the wall of people standing before him and dash past, carrying bulky fabric sacks looted from the fire area. When one of the sacks split and spilled on the street, Radnor snatched up a piece of its contents: compressed carbon, a primitive fuel. And that accounted for the head of the blaze now illuminating the sky overhead. Kern had landed in or near a fuel

storage area. Huge piles of the carbon burned with great intensity, sending up acrid fumes and flickering blue lights. With any luck the capsule might already be consumed in the blaze. And that would solve another problem.

For an instant Radnor almost gave in to the wild hope that Kern, too, might have been trapped in the pyre, but he could not bring himself to wish the extinction of any sentient creature, even one so patently mad as Kern.

He drew the psi-detector from his pack and stared at the directional indicator. Nothing. If Kern lived, he was out of range. Luckily no one else in the crowd registered the slightest quiver on the detector's gauge. That would have been the end of his hunt, Radnor knew, to discover that these primitives possessed measurable psi-powers. He almost smiled; things were looking up.

He began the hunt.

KEEPING as near the blaze as caution would allow, he circled to the north, to his left. The fire had been contained, confined to four blocks of fuel depot and warves. The river to the east had saved the fire fighters a good share of their work; it also cut the arc of Radnor's search to a mere hundred and eighty degrees.

He circled left to the water's edge, then doubled back to retrace his steps and scout the south half of the semicircle mapped out in his mind. The streets here were cobblestoned, the buildings larger but still of wooden construction. Passersby ignored him, more involved in shouting greetings to one another and waving bottles—apparently some intoxicant. He sensed festival in the crowd's mood.

The southern arc of his search failed to draw any indication on the psi-detector. Several times he stepped into doorways to avoid knots of men who roamed the streets, singing and shouting. And then he saw a flicker on his gauge; it pointed back the way he had come, back toward the ship. As he turned to move in that direction a trio of men accosted him boisterously, but he avoided their grasp and ducked around a corner— and into the arms of a fleshy, flaccid woman with straw-colored hair and red dye smeared across her mouth. He recoiled from her touch before recognizing her for what she was. The night women on Melan shaved their heads—he tried not to judge; cultures differ. He pushed past her just as she changed appearance before his eyes, the straw-colored hair giving way to a shaven, gilded skull.

He snatched out the stunner, but Kern was gone into the darkness. Radnor cursed again and followed.

It's a game to him. He is playing tag with me...

Radnor swung into an easy lope,

glancing at the psi-detector's wobbling needle every few yards. Once he stumbled over a loose board in the sidewalk and heard Kern's raucous laughter from the darkness ahead. Kern was leading him back toward his own ship.

It was hard to tell who dictated the game, he or Kern. And it was becoming obvious he was in real trouble—how would he recapture someone he couldn't even recognize? Behind him pale light streaked the horizon above the ramshackle shanties. Morning soon. And what then? He mentally tested a few feeble excuses, trying to invent one his Division Chief might accept. None existed. It was find Kern, or else.

He recognized buildings as he ran; he had come this way toward the fire. But how could Kern know where the ship lay hidden? He couldn't see through the camouflage. Perhaps his powers included area-sensing. He had been aboard the ship long enough to familiarize himself with the aura of its electronic equipment, even though the dossier hadn't so much as hinted at such possible talents.

Nova the dossier! And nova the medicos...

No one but Radnor knew a thing about Kern. And Radnor knew nothing certain any longer—nothing more than Kern's teasing him, a spoiled child playing a game.

He sprinted along the dimly lighted street, scrambling awkwardly through a pile of discarded bottles and trash which lay in his path as he cut across an empty lot toward the ship. No one was there ahead of him.

He paused to check the detector again. Motionless. But how? He knew Kern was nearby, sensed it. *Stop*, he told himself. *Think it out. Why did...*

A door burst open to his left and sent him diving to the ground, stunner in his hand. A quarrel poured through the open door and followed a heavy-set woman into the predawn paleness. She carried a metal container and shouted something over her shoulder as she walked toward the squat building beside which Radnor's ship stood. He waited quietly when she paused to glance at his disguised ship in bewilderment, then turned to shake her fist at the deep voice which pursued her from the house.

She walked on and Radnor relaxed. He watched her enter the shabby structure and lay thinking.

I know Kern's not dead. Can he be asleep?

Radnor glared at the sunlight slowly spreading its way up the side of his ship, then shook his head in resignation. He did not dare a liftoff in full daylight; someone would certainly see. And that meant he would have to wait till dark, either that or destroy the ship and sentence himself to live out his life in this barbaric settlement. Worse, such an action would

consign Kern to their midst as well.

When matters reached the stage of full dilemma, Radnor knew what to do. Nothing. He stopped planning.

Let things happen, then react...

The deep voice roared through the lighted doorway once more, and Radnor treated himself to the luxury of shouting a tired curse in answer before entering his ship.

DARKNESS settled. Radnor had spent the day in edgy rest, waiting for Kern's next move. All alarm systems were rigged but no one had approached the ship closer than a few meters. Radnor had not wasted his irritating leisure. Turning the ship's audible receivers to full power, he had lain in half-sleep while the ship's translator banks accumulated, parsed, analyzed and taught him the language. "English," the primitives called it, a complex system but not impossible to grasp. Radnor grinned wryly; he could return to Melan, the Bailiff Corps' only expert in this "English," a skill calculated to get him sacked rather than admired.

Overheard conversations had provided him with interesting food for speculation. The night before had indeed been a sort of festival which recurred each seventh day. Called "Satyr-day" in English, it signaled free rein to licentiousness for a brief time, followed in turn by "Sun-day," the day of recovery from Satyr-day's excesses. People whose voices came through the ship's receivers boasted of clan warfare between locals and members of some civic subdivisions called "Conley's Patch" (named apparently for a resident) and "Kilgubbin" (untranslatable) to the northeast.

But none of that information helped Radnor locate Kern, who remained hidden somewhere nearby. At dusk the buxom woman of the early morning had once more briefly interrupted her continuing quarrel with her mate to visit their "barn" (a building for storing grain and foodstuffs, housing livestock). Other than that, the day had passed quietly. No one took special notice of his ship, a fact that he laid to the primitives' state of misery hanging on from the revels of Satyr-day.

When darkness completed itself, Radnor finished his preparations and left the ship, leaving behind his huntpack. Even its forcefield was unnecessary; Kern had no physical weapons, no weapons at all, in fact except himself. And Radnor now knew more about that "self"; it was the very weapon he would use against Kern.

Having watched people enter and leave several of the shanties in the neighborhood, he was certain that Kern hid in the "barn." It had remained deserted all day, except for the owner's brief visit, and Kern would certainly have chosen the

best possible hiding place for the game he now played. He was waiting to oust Radnor from the ship and take command himself—"Hill Governor," they had called the game in Radnor's youth.

He stalked Kern slowly, trusting now to the indefinable tingle he had come to associate with Kern's presence aboard the ship. He moved toward the barn in a slow, arcing path, keeping between the barn exit and the ship.

Must keep Kern from the ship. Supress all other thoughts. Keep Kern from the ship or he'll escape...

The barn door slid open easily at his touch and he peered into the musky darkness. The feeling was stronger. Kern was...

Keep Kern from the ship or he'll take off without me. It's easy to fly it. Anyone could fly it. Keep Kern from the ship...

He stepped inside. Shadows flickered along the far wall, cast in the light of a petroleum lantern left hanging on a hook inside the door. Kern was nowhere in sight. Several feathered bipeds ("*chickens*") clucked and scratched at the dusty floor.

Don't let Kern get to the ship. The red switch activates anti-grav. If Kern lies on the command cot and hits that switch...Keep Kern from the ship...

Two cows (mature female bovine, genus *Bos*) swung their sad eyes toward him and lowed quietly. Radnor moved toward the far end of the barn, peering carefully into the dark corners.

Where would he hide? What form has he—DON'T! Don't suspect. Keep Kern from the ship. Easy to fly. Freedom that way. Win the game. Finders keepers...

He inched slowly through the swirling dust, carefully turning his back to the door and forcing himself not to think, *To think, to think, to think...*

It happened. Kern's wild laugh echoed behind him but Radnor willed himself still, not moving, giving Kern the chance to run. He turned then and saw one of the cows rise up on her/its/his hind legs and shift form, now Kern, now not-Kern. And Kern made his break. Radnor walked slowly toward her/it/him, thinking, *Safe if he gets to the ship. Nothing to stop him. The ship and escape...*

But he had misjudged his quarry. Not content merely to flee Kern snatched the lantern from its hook with one hand/hoof—and hurled it. Radnor ducked as the petroleum spewed across the wooden floor and scattered a carpet of golden flames washing through the tinder-dry refuse toward him. A curtain of fire rose instantly to the rafters and cut off Radnor's escape. But he whirled and kicked out a wooden shutter, then dove through the opening as Kern rounded the corner of the barn, sprinting now on two legs,

shifting appearance in the ghostly light that flickered through cracks in the barn wall.

Radnor heard, *I win!* echo in his mind's ear. He hit the hatch opening an instant before it cycled shut. He was inside, thinking, *Kern's free. He'll escape. The red switch. Lie on the cot and hit the red switch...*

He flinched in the deluge of laughter pouring over him and watched Kern, now the bronzed All-Man again, dive to the couch and slam a palm against the antigrav activator. And against the tranquilizer dart imbedded there, point up. Kern lunged back in anger, but too late. Elastisteel webbing fell from overhead and pinioned him to the command cot, where he struggled violently as the ship lifted. Then his struggles grew weaker as his body betrayed him. Only his mind reached out to Radnor, crying, *Cheating! Cheating! I won!*

Radnor ducked behind the psi-shield and protected himself with mentally recited paradigms: *I am, you are, he is, we are, you are, they are . . .*

When Kern's thrashing subsided Radnor inched cautiously out from behind the psi-shield and finished binding his prisoner, this time in coil after coil of elastisteel line. He propped and strapped Kern once more in the body rack and vowed not to exchange so much as a glance with him until touchdown at the psi-test asteroid. Let the medicos take over then.

A few days more and the assignment was over, a few days in which to rehearse his testimony. If he could persuade the Division Chief that he had saved the Corps' reputation against impossible odds he might not be drummed out in disgrace. And as for violating the interdiction, well—no harm done.

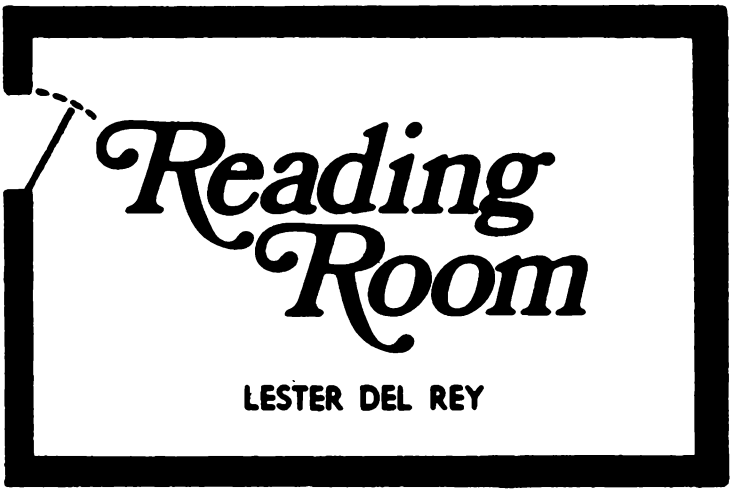
CODA:

THREE HUNDRED DEAD
THOUSANDS HOMELESS IN
DISASTROUS FIRE

Special to The Clarion

CHICAGO, Monday, October 9, 1871—Yesterday's blaze still rages out of control in the West and South Divisions. Various authorities have blamed labor agitators, a group of the city's Irish pilfering in the dead of night or other unnamed agents. Mr. Padraic Sweeney of 2240 DeKoven St. reports having seen a cow upset a lantern which ignited the O'Leary barn. Mrs. O'Leary denies it, claiming instead that lightning struck the barn at 9:30 P.M.

Police suspect the same party or parties unknown who set Saturday night's mysterious fire between Canal and Clinton Streets. They are investigating and expect to make arrests shortly... ●



I'M TOLD by many who stare darkly into the glass of the future that these are confusing times. It must be so. Of course, reading the auguries from the flight of birds or the necromantic spread of intestinal fortitude is at best a chancy occupation. Yet I've always labored under the simplistic idea that in the area I know the flight of birds northward presages summer. Now others, at worst as close to market conditions as I, look at the sky and proclaim loudly that all the signs portend a long and cold winter.

For several years now I have been hearing the clamor of those most sure of their oracular art that the old ways in popular fiction—and especially in science fiction—are dead. We are about to see the deluge of the main stream wash away all the trash of our pulp settling pond. Then there will be an end to all but the most serious and artistic handling of the messages of those writers saddened by the bitter experience of perhaps three decades. The days of pulp fiction are gone, and science fiction has been displaced by speculative fiction, or street fiction—whatever that is—or some such.

Then I go down to my neighborhood newsstand or watch the mail that comes bearing advance copies of books from the publishers. Damn it, the birds are still flying north in the same old ways and waves—and there seem to be other observers thrilling with me to the wild and exultant bugling of the geese flying back to their homes and their places of origin.

For every book that heralds a new movement fraught with new messages, I see three that are harking more and more strongly back to the old forms of entertainment. I see serial characters coming back to their former strength. I even see some of the same characters that kept me awake reading by little besides moonlight being reprinted and being read by young audiences. And I see writers who have made their largest reputation by the work that was *avant garde* for its time now turning happily toward ways in fiction that are older than they are.

Take a look at the stands. G-8 is flying over the trenches again, the Shadow still haunts the night and Doc Savage has returned from Hell to lead his small band through a long list of (almost) science-fiction adventures. Conan is doing well in Aquilonia and elsewhere, and all the Burroughs crew (Edgar Rice, not William) are saving maidens from fates more interesting than death. And all have their imitators among our writers. It would no longer surprise me to see even the continuation of Joe Skidmore's Posi and Nega series from ancient days.

Case in point: *Lord of the Trees* and *The Mad Goblin*, by Philip José Farmer (Ace Double, 75¢).

Few writers have enjoyed or earned more respect for setting new horizons for science fiction than Farmer. From his first story on, through more than twenty years, he has led his own individual fight to do his own thing as a writer—and he has done so, often exceedingly well. He has also written quite a few stories for the pure fun of adventure and entertainment, but those have also carried a strong element of individuality.

Now he has set about a sort of spoof of two old pulp-hero series—and has also managed to tell a story (since both knit together to form one main story) that could well stand on its own as a first class pulp job. *Goblin* deals with the later exploits of a man who is obviously the model for Lester Dent's original Doc Savage; and Lord Grandrith admits at once that he is the man whose "biographer" romanticized him as Tarzan.

Both are alive and well today—and, of course, immortal; they have to be to carry on as of old. Doc Caliban even has two men who are the sons of and almost identical with his old friends, Ham and Monk. But these two are men who were once led somewhat astray by a company of the Nine—the evil immortals who secretly control the world—in return for that immortality. Now each in his separate way is trying to stamp out that evil.

Goblin strikes me as a remarkably successful modern episode to tie into the Doc Savage cycle. It

works exactly as the originals did and I think it would have sold (with only necessary changes) to the original magazine on its merit back in those good old days. The modernizing and Farmer insights into "Doc Caliban" seem to add much and take nothing away from the original.

The Tree Lord episode is more spotty. At the beginning and through at least half of it, I was delighted. Farmer shows every sign of being able to get to the heart of the whole Tarzan legend and to make his character a man both feral and romantic, without distorting much of anything. But then the fact that the two stories are knit into one begins to warp things.

Tarzan always managed to wind up in some wild and wondrous place, from Opar on, with very few exceptions—as in his adventure with the Leopard Men, a distinctly inferior job—Lord Grandrith misses the boat here because he has to get back to join forces with Caliban. From the moment he gets out of the pit he becomes only a shadow to the other character—and this doesn't ring right.

But taken as a spoof or even taken straight, the total book is fun to read. And I hope that Farmer will go on to do sequels—though please, Phil, get Grandrith into the wonderlands of the apeman we know, even if you have to take him out of the main scene of Caliban's mission.

THERE are plenty of true modern science fiction and science fantasy serial books being issued today. I count at least a score without turning to my bookshelves to check for more. Most of them leave a good bit to be desired. But one showed signs of developing after what I considered a rather unimpressive start, and the writer strikes me as one who could come closer to catching the feeling and romance of the old Burroughs Martian books than anyone else today. I'd hate to see him falter, though he seems to be doing so.

Due to be published late in December, *Assassins of Gor* by John Norman (Ballantine, 95¢) is the fifth of the Gor series. In some ways it shows tremendous promise; but as a piece of fiction by itself, it fails pretty badly through most of its great length.

Gor, the counter-Earth opposite us around the Sun, is shaping up as a planet with the feeling of reality that I associate only with Burroughs' worlds. From the view of developing background, the series has been getting steadily better. And there is some evidence that Norman is learning a great deal about the craft of writing adventure fiction. Unfortunately he seems also to desire desperately to lay waste his talents in pursuit of his dream of bilge messages.

The first two of the series were pretty routine imitations of Bur-

roughs, as I saw them (though I was told Norman had never read Burroughs; I reserve my private doubts). Then, with *Priest-Kings of Gor*, came a sudden spurt upward. Here the wooden menace of the Priest Kings became totally different from the routine menace of the Gods of Mars. The Priest Kings developed their own traits and rationale and Norman suddenly proved that he could handle feelings and emotions as well as mere action. Then we got *Nomads of Gor*, which wasn't too bad, except that a great part of it was devoted to the stirring messages of Men's Lib: Get beneath me, female chauvinist slave! Where he should have been handling the story of the finding of the lost Priest Kings' egg, he spent great periods proving that in reality women were only happy when they were being totally subdued by a Real Man who would prove their natural state of slavery. A little of that was sort of fun, but it wasn't as good as the rest of the life of the Nomads, where Norman was showing how very good he could be at handling background.

Now, in the latest book, he's back at the old stand of Male Supremacy with a slightly different flavor. (Why it is called *Assassins* is a puzzle; there's only one assassin, and he isn't, really; should have been *Slaves of Gor*.) While women are still naturally much happier when being subdued by men, it turns out that generally slavery is a rather bad thing.

It's nice to have such significant messages and original insights on so controversial a theme, Mr. Norman, but they get in the way of the story. In fact, there is basically no story for 60% of the lengthy book. Then, to be sure, it does pick up and proceed fairly well—but that's a bit late.

This time, Tarl Cabot is both an avowed assassin and an agent of the Priest Kings to find more about an extra-Solar race that seems to be trying to overthrow both Gor and Earth. He goes to the great city of Ar and takes up service in the house of the chief salve trader of the city. Then he sits around and watches and observes and occasionally thinks a little and eats and rests and gets a chance to see and brags a bit to himself and . . .

Norman seems intent on proving that he isn't any mere hack adventure writer. He shows us he can do tricks. He begins his book very cleverly in the third person as Kuurus the Assassin and then switches most cunningly in the middle of a chapter to Tarl Cabot in the first person, as the other books were told. Clever—ineffective and needless, but you can see how he sneaked up on the silly readers. Norman has also discovered that great literary device, the flashback; that is, when he comes to anything the reader

might want to experience directly, he jumps immediately into some stirring insight into slave handling, and then only leisurely gets around to telling what happened after the skip. That way he doesn't have to waste long pages on major events but can summarize them in a paragraph or so. It's a device that always wins great applause and respect from bad writers, since it saves so much hard writing and also makes the writer feel he isn't doing mere action fiction. Of course, it denies the reader exactly what he bought the book for—but wouldn't the reader really rather find out how slaves hold a drunken holiday?

The grossest example of this comes when Norman has carefully and rather tensely built up to a major race between the great birds of Gor, the Tarn. Cabot must win, since he has to prove himself, and everything looks hopeless. But after he starts, we have to wade through pages of Chapter 17 to find that—oh, yes, incidentally he won and became the most famous Tarn racer on Gor—he can still beat up a slave girl.

There are also repeated examples of the writer forgetting what he has already stated and restating it and then telling it all over again. This could have been edited out easily with a slash of the blue pencil, but I suppose Norman has joined the great artists among our writers who know their words are too precious to change. Or else some editor wasn't trying that day.

It's a shame, because Norman has begun to get an excellent feeling for the planet of Gor and its people, and it is beginning to emerge as more than the cardboard background most writers other than Burroughs have created. And under all the waste and guff of this book, there are the bones of a story that may be important in future books in the series. If you're an incurable fan of Gor (or if you're merely curious about the development of John Norman), I suppose this book should be read. There's some pleasure in it, and judicious skipping in the first half should make it reasonably easy reading.

I still hope there will be further books. Perhaps more experience and a few good words from other writers will persuade Norman that he's basically a darned good story teller and that he doesn't have to go chuntering off after spurious messages and cheap tricks. He can probably be the best in his field, if he's willing to learn that.

I'd hate to see this revival of the pulpier background die away again for lack of care by the writers and the editors. It can serve as a stepping stone into better science fiction for readers who could not be turned on by the artcynic school. Also, there's room for every kind of good fiction and

honest writing in any field. Whether new wave, old wave or other wave, any way of telling a good story or giving readers genuine satisfaction should be encouraged, rather than stamped out for anything except bad craft and dishonest intent.

One of the most encouraging facts about science fiction to me is that good books seem to be less apt to die quickly in this field than any other. Books go out of print, but most of them appear again in a few years. The beginning reader is less likely to miss a classic science-fiction story today than ever before.

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN wrote a number of stories which should have been considered classics, but which are lost to most of his adult readers because they appeared in hard covers as Scribner juveniles. This made them too expensive for many readers and turned others off because they didn't want to read that "kid stuff." They missed quite a bit, however, since none of Heinlein's juveniles is anything but an adult book with a slightly younger hero —often accompanied by or working through an older protagonist. In fact, most of the kids who seem to put him first in their science-fiction reading give as their chief reason the fact that the books don't read like "kid books."

A couple of these have been available in soft covers for some years, but most have been restricted to the hardbound library editions. Now the limits seem to be off. Heinlein's *Tunnel in the Sky* has been released in paper from Ace at 95¢, and I hope it's the beginning of a trend.

This is a cracking good old-style adventure story, with a well-constructed set of ethical considerations and ideas built into it. And there's nothing obvious about the characters, the background, or the plot itself—as there is in too much of what is called juvenile fiction.

It's the story of a bunch of young men and women (old enough to have children, so I don't consider them "kids") who are sent through a tube between or through or over the dimensions to another world as a test of their fitness to graduate from Survival Training. They can pick their own weapons and equipment but they're to know nothing about their destination in advance. They must survive there for two weeks before they can be returned. Those who live graduate; the others obviously have failed the course.

The going for the principals is tough enough for two weeks. But at the end of that time the pickup fails to appear. And they gradually realize that they may be stranded for years—or forever. They still know almost nothing about the dangers of the world on which

they find themselves. But as best they can they have to find a way to pass the ultimate Survival Test—the survival of self and kind.

Nothing is obvious from there on. But it's beautifully worked out. If you haven't read it, do so at once.

Ace has also reissued Ursula K. LeGuin's *City of Illusions* (60¢). This is vaguely related to the same author's award-winning *Left Hand of Darkness*, but can stand wholly on its own. It's an odd story of one not-quite-human man's odyssey through a strange and haunted Earth to find for himself the enemy of the true humans and of himself—with suggestions that he may be the enemy he is seeking.

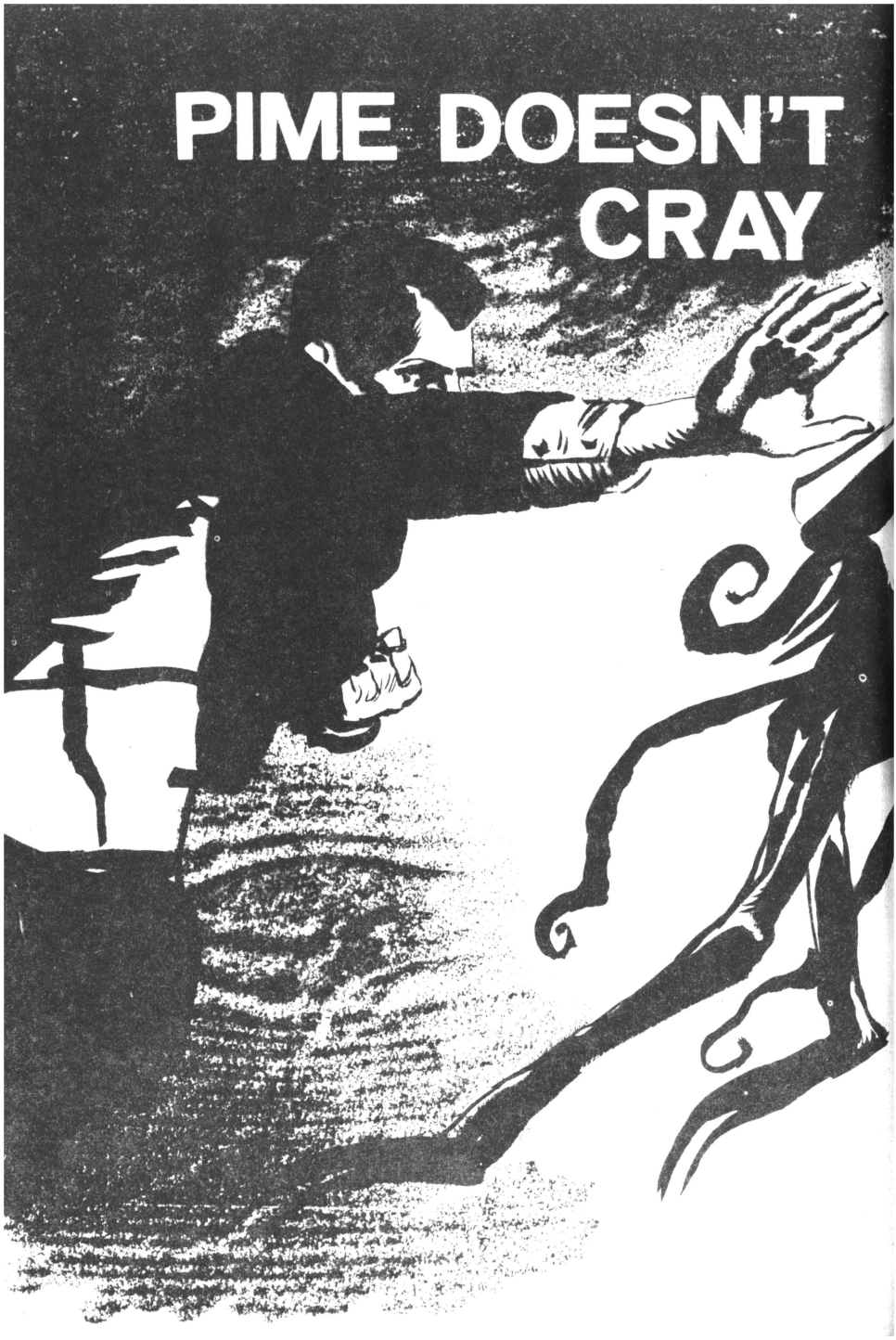
It lacks the depth of emotional involvement in the writer's later book, but it has a mood and increasing tension that make it compelling reading. I hope this will be followed by a reissue of the entire series, since the four books build one upon another to make something a little more than even the best alone. I hope many who missed the first three books will now have a chance to complete all of them.

ANOTHER book that deserves more attention that it received when it was first issued five years ago is *The Ship that Sailed the Time Stream* by G.C. Edmondson (Ace, 75¢). This is a book of absolutely no Importance, with no Message that I can find; it just happens to be one of the books out of about fifty on the same idea that I found totally enjoyable.

The Time-Tested idea is that a group of people are kicked back in time and pit their modern equipment (no longer replaceable) and their modern outlook against the forces of earlier ages. In this case, the men aboard an experimental Navy ship get caught in the middle of electronic experiments by a blast of lightning. They find themselves a thousand years back in time. In no time at all they're faced with the attack of Viking raiding ships. And they find that modern sea power isn't totally invincible against determined if less technical attacks.

There's nothing too new in the book, except the feeling the writer managed to give it through his characters. Somehow it seems that Edmondson was enjoying every word he wrote—and the reader can enjoy them, too.

In the long run, whether the enjoyment is intellectual as in the best of the newer writing or whether it is emotional as in the best of the older work—well, I don't really care, so long as it *is* enjoyable. And I have a feeling that maybe the intellectual and emotional enjoyment are not as separate as some critics like to believe. •


PIME DOESN'T
CRAY

A **Retief** Novelette

KEITH LAUMER

I

A DRIVING rain lashed the tarmac as Retief stepped from the shuttlecraft that had ferried him down to the planetary surface. From the direction of the low, mushroom-shaped reception sheds a slight figure wrapped in a voluminous black rubber poncho came splashing toward him, waving excitedly.

"You got any enemies, Mac?" the shuttle pilot asked nervously, watching the newcomers' approach.

"A reasonable number," Retief replied, drawing on his cigar, which sputtered and hissed as the rain struck the glowing tip. "However, this is just Counselor Magnan from the Embassy, here to welcome me to the scene with the local disaster status, no doubt."

"No time to waste, Retief," Magnan panted as he came up. "Ambassador Grossblunder has

called a special staff meeting for five pee em—half an hour from now. If we hurry we can just make it. I've already seen to Customs and Immigration; I knew you'd want to be there, to, ah—"

"Share the blame?" Retief suggested.

"Hardly," Magnan corrected, flicking a drop of moisture from the tip of his nose. "As a matter of fact, I may well be in line for a word of praise for my handling of the Cultural Aid Project. It will be an excellent opportunity for you to get your feet wet, local scenewise," he amplified, leading the way toward the Embassy car waiting beside the sheds.

"According to the latest supplement to the Post Report," Retief said as they settled themselves against the deep-pile upholstery, "the project is scheduled for completion next week. Nothing's gone wrong with the timetable, I hope?"

Magnan leaned forward to rap at the glass partition dividing the enclosed passenger compartment from the open-air driver's seat. The chauffeur, a rather untidy-looking local who seemed to consist of a snarl of purple macaroni topped by a peaked cap with a shiny bill, angled what Retief deduced to be an ear to catch the Terran's instructions.

"Just swing past the theater on your way down, Chauncey," Magnan directed. "In answer to your question," he said complacently to Retief, "I don't mind saying the project went off flawlessly, hitchwise. In fact, it's completed a week early. As Project Director, I fancy it's something of a feather in my cap, considering the frightful weather conditions we have to contend with here on Squale."

"Did you say theater? As I recall, the original proposal called for the unusual Yankee Stadium-type sports arena."

MAGNAN smiled loftily. "I thought it time to vary the program."

"Congratulations, Mr. Magnan." Retief sketched a salute with his cigar. "I was afraid the *Corps Diplomatique* was going to go on forever inflicting bigger and better baseball diamonds on defenseless natives, while the Groaci countered with ever-larger and uglier Bolshoi-type ballet arenas."

"Not this time," Magnan stated with satisfaction. "I've beaten the scamps at their own game. This is Top Secret, mind you—but this time *we've* built the Bolshoi-type ballet theater!"

"A masterful gambit, Mr. Magnan. How are the Groaci taking it?"

"They've come up with a rather ingenious counterstroke, I must concede. Informed opinion has it the copycats are assembling an imitation Yankee Stadium in re-

prisal." Magnan peered out through the downpour. The irregularly shaped buildings lining the winding avenue loomed mistily, obscured by sheets of wind-driven precipitation. Ahead, a gap in their orderly ranks was visible. Magnan frowned as the car cruised slowly past a large erratically shaped bulk set well back from the curb.

"Here, Chauncey," he called. "I instructed you to drive to the project site."

"Thure shing, moss-ban," a voice like a clogged drain replied placatingly. "Weer we har."

"Chauncey—have you been drinking?"

"Woe, nurse luck." Chauncey braked to a stop; the windshield wipers rotated busily; the air cushion sighed heavily, driving ripples across the puddled street. "Book, loss—we're right astreet the cross from the Libric publary, *nicht vahr*?"

"The Lublic Pibrary, you mean —I mean the pubic lilberry—"

"Yeah, mats what I thean. So—there's the piblary—so buts the weef?" Chauncey extended the cluster of macaroni that served as his hand, to wave like seaweed in a light current.

"Visibility is simply atrocious here on Squale." Magnan sniffed, rolling down the window and recoiling as a blast of rain splattered his face. "But even so—I shouldn't think I could get confused as to the whereabouts of my own project."

"It looks like a collapsed circus tent," Retief commented, studying the half-acre of canvas apparently supported by a half-dozen randomly placed props.

"An optical illusion," Magnan said firmly. "The structure is under wraps, of course; it's a secret, you know. It's just the lighting, no doubt, that makes it look so—so sort of squatty and unplanned." He was squinting ferociously into the rain, shading his eyes with a hand. "Still, why don't we just pop out and have a closer look?"

Magnan thrust the door open and stumbled out; Retief followed. They crossed a walk of colored, glazed tile, skirted a bed of foot-wide green blossoms. Magnan lifted aside a fold of plastic sheeting, revealing a yawning excavation at the bottom of which severed electrical and plumbing connections poked up through the surface of the muddy water pooling there.

"A treat nick," Chauncey said admiringly over his shoulder. "Do'd you how it, Master Mignan?"

"Do'd I how what?" Magnan croaked.

"Dis it makappear," Chauncey amplified. "The meaning, I build."

"Retief," Magnan whispered, blinking hard. "Tell me I'm seeing things; I mean, that I'm not seeing things."

"Correct," Retief said, "either way you phrase it."

"Retief," Magnan said in a breaking voice. "Do you realize what this means?"

Retief tossed his cigar down into the empty pit, where it hissed and went out. "Either you were kidding me about the project—"

"I assure you—"

"—or we're standing on the wrong corner—"

"Absolutely not!"

"Or someone," Retief said, "has stolen one each Bolshoi type ballet theater."

AND I was dreaming of feathers in my cap," Magnan moaned as the car braked to a halt before the imposing facade of the Terrestial Embassy. "I'll be fortunate to salvage my cap from this fiasco—or my head, for that matter. How will I ever tell Ambassador Grossblunder I've misplaced his pet project?"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll be able to pass the incident off with your usual *savoir faire*," Retief soothed him as they stepped out into the drizzle. The Squalese doorman, loosely packed in a regulation CDT-issue coverall, nodded a cluster of writhing violet-hued filaments at the Terrans as they came up.

"Jowdy, hents," he said as the door whooshed open. "Rice nain, eh?"

"What's so rice about it?" Magnan inquired acidly. "Harvey—has His Excellency gone in?"

"Men tinutes ago—in a masty nude. Didn't even hey sello."

Inside, Magnan groaned, put a hand to his brow. "Retief—I seem to have come down with a splitting headache. Why don't you nip along and mention this development just casually to the Ambassador. Possibly you could play it down a trifle. No need to upset him unduly, eh?"

"Good idea, Mr. Magnan," Retief said, handing his weather cape into the check room. "I'll hint that it's all a publicity trick you dreamed up to publicize the grand opening."

"Excellent notion! And if you could subtly plant the idea that you'll have it back in place in time for the festivities—" Magnan looked hopefully at Retief.

"Since I just arrived fifteen minutes ago I think that would be rather pushy of me. Then, too, he might want to know why you were lying down at such a critical moment in Terran/Squalian relations."

Magnan groaned again, resignedly.

"Let's hurry along, gentlemen," a short, black-eyebrowed man in uniform called from the open elevator door across the lobby. "We're holding the car for you."

Magnan straightened his narrow shoulders. "Coming, Colonel Otherday," he croaked.

"Remember, Retief," he added in an undertone, "we'll behave as though it were the most natural thing in the world for a ten-million-credit building to vanish between breakfast and lunch."

"Did I hear someone mention lunch?" a portly diplomat inquired from the back of the car.

"You just ate, Lester," a lean commercial attaché said. "As for you, Mr. Retief, you picked an inauspicious moment to put in an appearance; I gather the Ambassador's in a towering pet this evening."

Magnan glanced nervously at Retief. "Ah—any idea what's troubling his Excellency?"

"Who knows?" the attaché shrugged. "Last time it was a deteriorating man/bean ratio in the Embassy snack bar."

"This time it's even bigger than the bean crisis," Colonel Otherday stated flatly. "I have a feeling that this time heads will roll."

"Does it have anything to do with, ah, anything that might be—missing?"

"Ah-hah!" the lean attaché pounced. "He knows something, gentlemen."

"Come on, Magnan," the portly First Secretary urged. "Let us in on it."

"How is it you always have the word first?" the colonel inquired plaintively.

"Well, as to that—" Magnan started.

"Mr. Magnan is under oath to reveal nothing, gentlemen," Retief cut in smoothly as the car halted and the doors slid back on a wide, deep-carpeted conference room.

II

A LONG, polished table occupied the middle of the floor, unadorned but for long yellow pads and ballpoint pens at each place. A few seconds of unobtrusive scuffling ensued as the diplomats, all veteran campaigners, vied for choice positions, balancing the prestige of juxtaposition to the Ambassadorial chair against inconspicuousness in the event of scapegoat selection.

All hands stood as the inner door was flung wide. The stern-visaged, multi-chinned figure of Ambassador Grossblunder entered the room under full sail. He scanned the assembled bureaucrats without visible approval, seated himself in the chair the Agricultural Attaché leaped to pull out, shot a piercing glance along the table and cleared his throat.

"Lock the doors," he said. "Gentlemen, be seated. I have solemn news for you." He paused impressively. "We," he concluded solemnly, "have been robbed!"

A sigh passed along the table. All eyes swiveled to Magnan.

"Robbed," Grossblunder repeated, emphasizing the point with

a blow of his fist which made the pencils, plus a number of the diplomats, jump. "I have for some time suspected that foul play was afoot; a short time ago my worst fears were confirmed. Gentlemen, there is a thief among us."

"Among us?" Magnan blurted. "But how—I mean, why—that is to say, Mr. Ambassador, how could one of *us* have purloined the—ah—loot in question?"

"You may well ask. One might also logically inquire as to why any person connected with this Mission could so far forget himself as to hide the feet that banns him. That is, bite the fan that heeds him. I mean beat the hide that fans him. Confound it, you know what I mean." Grossblunder grabbed a glass of water and gulped a swallow. "Been here too long," he muttered. "Losing my grasp of the well-rounded period."

"A thief, you say, sir?" Colonel Otherday prompted. "Well, how interesting—"

"Interesting is hardly the word for it," Grossblunder barked. "Apalling is a cut nearer the mark. Shocking, though a trifle flaccid, carries a portion of the connotation. This is a grievous blot on the CDT copybook, gentlemen. A blow struck at the very foundations of Galactic accord."

A nameless chorus rose.

"Right, chief—"

"Well phrased, sirs—"

"You said it, Boss—"

"Now, if anyone here wishes to come forward at this juncture—" Grossblunder's ominous gaze travelled along the table, lingered on Magnan.

"You appear to be the focal point of all eyes, Magnan," the Ambassador accused. "If you've a comment, don't hesitate. Speak up."

"Why, as a matter of fact, sir—" Magnan gulped—"I just wanted to say that as for myself, I was utterly appalled—that is to say shocked—when I discovered the loss. Why, you could have knocked me over with the feather in my cap—I mean—"

Grossblunder looked ominous. "You're saying you were already aware of the pilferage, Magnan?"

"Yes, and—"

The Ambassador glowered.

"And failed to confide this intelligence to me?"

"I didn't actually know until a few minutes ago," Magnan explained hastily. "Why, sir, you are positive miles ahead of me. I'm simply able to confirm your revelation—not that any confirmation is needed, of course."

"There, gentlemen," Grossblunder said with admiration, "is my conception of an alert officer. While the rest of you went about your business, oblivious of the light fingers operating to the detriment of this Mission, my Counselor, Mr. Magnan, alone among my subordinates, sensed mischief afoot.

My congratulations to you, sir."

"Why, ah, thank you, Mr. Ambassador." Magnan essayed a fragile smile. "I do try to keep abreast of developments—"

"And since you seem to have the matter in hand, you're appointed Investigative Officer to get to the bottom of the matter without delay. I'll turn my records over to you without further ado." Grossblunder shot his cuff, allotted a glance to his watch. "As it happens, my VIP copter is at this moment warming up on the roof to whisk me over to the Secretariat, where I expect to be tied up for the remainder of the evening in high-level talks with the Foreign Minister regarding slurb-fruit allocations for the coming fiscal quarter. It seems our Groaci colleagues are out to cut us out of the pattern luxury-trade-wise, a consummation hardly to be tolerated on my record." He rose. "You'll accompany me to the helipad, Magnan, for last-minute briefing. As for the rest of you—let Magnan's performance stand as an example. You, there—" he pointed at Retief—"you may carry my briefcase."

ON THE roof—aslosh with rainwater under the perpetually leaden sky—Grossblunder turned to Magnan.

"I expect fast action, Ben. We can't allow this sort of thing to pass unnoticed, as it were."

"I'll do my best, sir," Magnan chirped. "And I do want to say it's awfully white of you not to hold me personally responsible—not that anyone could actually blame me, of course—"

"You responsible? No, I see no way in which I could benefit from that. Besides which," he added, "you're not an Admin man."

"Admin man, sir? What—"

"My analysis of the records indicates that a steady trickle over the past two years at the present rate could account for a total discrepancy on the order of sixty-seven gross. Think of that, Magnan."

"Sixty-seven Bolshoi-type ballet theaters?" Magnan quavered.

Grossblunder blinked, then allowed a smile to quirk a corner of his mouth.

"No need to hint, Magnan. I haven't forgotten your magnificent performance in the completion of the project six days ahead of schedule. The grand opening tomorrow is the one bright spot on my Effectiveness Report—on my horizon, that is to say. I wouldn't be surprised if there were a citation in store for the officer responsible." He winked, then frowned. "But don't allow the prospect to drive the matter of the missing paper clips into eclipse. I want action."

"Paper clips, sir?"

"A veritable torrent of them, dropped from Embassy records as

expendable items. Outrageous! But no need to say more, my boy; you're as aware as I of the seriousness of the situation." Grossblunder gripped his junior's thin shoulder. "Remember, Magnan—I'm counting on you." He turned and clambered into his seat. With a rising flutter of rotors the light machine lifted into the overcast and was gone. Magnan turned shakily to Retief.

"I—I thought—I thought he knew—"

"Yes," Retief said commiseratingly. "Still, you can always pick an opportune time to tell him later. While he's pinning on the medal, perhaps."

"How can you jest at such a moment? Do you realize that I have to solve not one but two crimes, before the Ambassador and the Minister finish a bottle of Port?"

"That's a thought; maybe you can get a quantity discount. Still, we'd better get started before they run the ante up any higher."

BACK in his office, Magnan found awaiting him a letter bearing the Great Seal of the Groacian Autonomy.

"It's an *Aide Memoire* from that wretch, Ambassador Shinth," he told Retief. "Announcing he's moving the date for the unveiling of his Cultural Aid project up to midnight tonight." He groaned, tossed the note aside. "This is the final blow, Retief. He's ready to throw out the opening ball—and I'm without so much as a kiosk to offer in rebuttal!"

"I understood the Groaci were behind schedule."

"They are. This entire affair is impossible, Retief. No one could have stolen a complete building overnight—and if they had, where would they hide it? And even if they found a place to hide it—and we were able to turn it up—how in the world would we get it back in position in time for a ceremony scheduled less than twenty hours, local, from this moment?"

"That covers the questions," Retief said. "We may have a little more trouble with the answers."

"The building was there last night; I stopped to admire the classical neon meander adorning the architrave on my way home. A splendid effect; Shinth would have been green with envy—or whatever color Groaci diplomats turn when confronted with an esthetic coup of such proportions."

"He may be quietly turning puce with satisfaction at this moment," Retief suggested. "Rather coincidental timing, isn't it? His project ready to go and ours missing."

"How will I ever face Shinth?" Magnan was muttering. "Only last night I assayed a number of sly jests at his expense. I thought at the time he took them rather blandly—" Magnan broke off to stare at Retief. "Great heavens,"

he gasped. "Are you hinting those sneaky little five-eyed Meyer-come-latelies could have so far abused diplomatic practice as to be behind this outrage?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," Retief admitted. "Offhand I can't think of anyone else who might have a yen for a Bolshoi-type ballet theater."

Magnan leaped up, yanking the pale mauve lapels of his early mid-afternoon hemi-demi-informal cutaway into place.

"Of course," he cried. "Call out the Marine guard, Retief. I'll march right up to that underhanded little weasel and demand the return of the purloined edifice on the spot."

"Better be careful what spot you're on," Retief cautioned. "A Bolshoi-type ballet theater occupies a full block, remember."

"An ill-timed jape, Retief," Magnan snapped. "Well, what are you waiting for?" He paused, frowning. "Am I to deduce from your apparent lack of enthusiasm that you see some flaw in the scheme?"

"Just a small one," Retief said. "His Groacian Excellency has probably covered his tracks quite carefully. He'll laugh in your face—unless you can show some proof."

"Not even Shinth would have the cheek to deny the facts if I catch him red-handed." Magnan paused, looking troubled. "Of course, I haven't actually found any evidence yet—" He nipped at a hangnail and cast a sidelong glance at Retief.

"A ballet theater isn't the easiest thing in the world to hide," Retief said. "Suppose we try to turn it up first—then we can start on the problem of how to get it back."

"Good notion, Retief. Just what I was about to suggest." Magnan looked at the watch on his thumb. "Why don't you just pop around and have a look here and there while I whip my paperwork into shape. After dinner we can get together and agree on a story—formulate a report, that is, indicating we've done everything possible."

LEAVING the Counselor's office, Retief went along to the Commercial Section. A chinless clerk looked up from among baled newspaper clippings.

"Hi, there, Mr. Retief. I see you made it."

"Freddy, I'd like to see a listing of all cargoes imported by the Groaci Embassy during the last twelve months."

The clerk poked the keys of the data bank, frowned at the list it disgorged.

"Flimsy construction they must have in mind," he said as he handed it over. "Cardboard and pick-up-sticks. Typical."

"Anything else?" Retief persisted.

"I'll check equipment imports." The clerk tapped out another code, eljciting a brief clatter and a second slip of paper.

"Heavy-duty lift units," he said. "Funny. They don't need heavy duty units to handle plywood and two-by's—"

"Four of them," Retief noted. "With wide-aperture fields and gang interlocks."

"Wow! With that, you could pick up the Squalid-Hilton."

"You could indeed," Retief agreed. "Thanks, Freddy."

Outside dusk; the car was still waiting at the curb. Retief directed Chauncey to drive back along the wet, tree-fern shaded avenues to the vacant edge-of-town site so recently occupied by the stolen building. Stepping out into the steady, warm rain, he entered the tent, circled the yawning excavation, studying the soft ground by the beam of a hand light.

"Look are you whatting for?" Chauncey inquired, ambling behind him on feet that resembled dishpan-sized wads of wet magenta yarn. "Ardon my pasking—but I taught you Therries lidn't dike feeting your get wet."

"Just getting the lie of the land, Chauncey," he said. "It appears that whoever pinched the theater lifted it out of here with grav units—probably intact, since there doesn't seem to be any evidence of disassembly."

"I goant dett you, chief," Chauncey said. "You lawk tight this roll houtine isn't trust a jick Master Mignan add off to pulvertise the And Gropening."

"Perish the thought, Chauncey; it's just my way of heightening the suspense." Retief stooped, picked up a pinkish dope-stick butt, sniffed at it. It gave off the sharp odor of ether characteristic of Groaci manufacture.

"We Squalians are no runch of boobs, you understand," Chauncey went on. "We've treen a few sicks in our time. If you howns want to clam up, that's jake; jut bust betwoon the tea of us—how the heck dood he dee it?"

"I'm afraid that's a diplomatic secret," Retief said. "Let's go take a look at the Groaci answer to our cultural challenge."

"Mot nuch to owe seever there," the local said disparagingly as they squelched back to the car, idling on its air cushion above a wide puddle. "Gothing noing on; and if were thuzz, you souldn't key it; they got this buy foard hence aplound the race and a tunch of barps everying coverthing up."

"The Groaci are a secretive group," Retief said. "But maybe we can get a peek anyway."

"I bon't know, doss; there's a gunch of buards around there, too—with yuns, get. They don't clett lobody net goase."

Steering through the rain-sleek streets under the celery-like trees, Chauncey hummed a sprightly

little tune, sounding first like a musical comb, then a rubber-stringed harp, ending with a blatter like a bursting bagpipe.

"Bot nad, hey?" he solicited a compliment, "all but that cast lord; it was subeezed to poe a tourish of flumpets, but my slinger fipped."

"Very impressive," Retief said. "How are you on woodwinds?"

"So-so," Chauncey said. "I'm stretter on bings. Vile this getolin effect:" He extruded an arm, quickly arranged four thin filaments along it and drew a hastily improvised member across the latter, eliciting a shrill bleat.

"Gutty pred, hey? I can't tay any plunes yet, but I lactice a prot; I'll pet it down gat in toe nime."

"Groaci nose-flute lover will come over to you in a body," Retief predicted. "By the way, Chauncey, how long have the Groaci been working on their ballpark?"

"Lell, wet's see: stay tharted it fast lall, bust ajout the time too Yerries foured your poundations—"

"It must be about finished, eh?"

"It hasn't changed such mince the worst feak; and a thunny fing: you sever seem to knee any jerkers around the wob; gust the jards." Chauncey swung the corner and pulled up before a ten-foot fence constructed of closely fitted plastic panels, looming darkly in the early evening gloom.

"Ear we har," he said. "Sike I lezz, you san't key a thing."

"Let's take a look around."

"Sure—but we petter beep an eye keeled; those dittle levels can squeak up awful niet."

LEAVING the car parked in a pool of shadow under the spreading fronds of a giant fern, Retief, followed by the Squalian, strolled along the walk, studying the unbroken wall that completely encircled the block. At the corner he paused, looked both ways. The street lamp glowed mistily on empty sidewalks.

"Give me a chord on the cello if you see anyone coming," he directed Chauncey. He extracted a slender instrument from an inner pocket, forced it between two planks and twisted. The material yielded with a creak, opening a narrow peep-hole, affording a view of pole-mounted lights which shed a yellowish glow on a narrow belt of foot-trampled mud stacked with 2 x 4's and used plywood, a fringe of ragged grass ending at a vertical escarpment of dun-colored canvas. A giant tarpaulin, held in place by a network of ropes, completely concealed the massive structure beneath it.

"Moley hoses," Chauncey's voice sounded at Retief's elbow. "Looks like they've been chaking some manages."

"What kind of changes?"

"Well—it's sard to hay, tunder

that arp—shut the bape of it dooks lifferent. Wa've been thirking on it, no bout adout that."

"Suppose we cruise over and pay a call at the Groaci Embassy," Retief suggested. "There are one or two more points that need clearing up."

"Boor, shoss—but it don't woo you any good. They pard that glace like it was the legendary Nort Fox."

"I'm counting on it, Chauncey."

It was a ten-block drive through rain-soaked streets. They parked a block from the fortresslike structure, prowled closer, keeping to the shadows. A pair of Groaci in elaborate uniforms stood stiffly flanking the gate in the high masonry wall.

"No hole-poking this time," Retief said. "We'll have to climb over."

"That's bisky, ross—"

"So is loitering on a dark corner," the Terran replied. "Let's go."

Five minutes later, having scaled the wall via an overhanging slurb-fruit tree, Retief and Chauncey stood in the Embassy compound, listening.

"Don't their a hing," the Squalian muttered. "Now what?"

"How about taking a look around, Chauncey," Retief suggested.

"Okay—dut I bon't like it—" Chauncey extended an eye-tipped pseudopod, which snaked away around the corner. Two minutes ticked past. Suddenly the chauffer stiffened.

"Giggers, the Joaci!" he exclaimed. "Let's cho, gief!" The eye-stalk retracted convulsively.

"Bammit, a dacklash," Chauncey yelped. Retief turned to see the driver struggling to untangle the hastily retracted eyestalk, which had somehow become snarled around one of it's owner's feet, which was in turn unraveling, an effect resembling a rag rug unknitting itself.

"Datt thid it," Chauncey grunted. "Bam, scross, I'll never let goose in time—"

Retief took two swift steps to the corner of the building. The patter of soft-shod feet approached rapidly. An instant later a spindle-legged alien in a black hip-cloak, ornamented leather greaves, GI eyeshields and a flaring helmet shot into view, met Retief's extended arm and did a neat back-flip into the mud. Retief grabbed up the scatter gun dropped by the Groaci Peacekeeper, switched it to wide dispersal, swinging the weapon to cover half a dozen more Groaci guards coming up rapidly on the right flank. They skidded to a halt. At the same moment a yell came from behind him; he glanced back, saw Chauncey struggling in the grasp of four more of the aliens, who had appeared from a doorway.

"To throw down the gun and

make no further move, Soft One," the captain in charge of the detail hissed in Groaci, "or to see your minion torn to vermicelli before your naked eyes."

III

BROODMASTER SHINTH, Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the Groacian Autonomy to the Squalian Aristarch, lolled back at ease in his power swivel chair, a pirated Groaci copy of a Terran diplomatic model. A cluster of aides hovered behind him, exchanging sibilant whispers and canting multiple eyes at Retief, who stood at ease before them, flanked by guards whose guns prodded his kidneys. Chauncey, pitiably trussed in his own versatile limbs, lay slumped in a corner of the underground office of the Groaci Chief of Mission.

"How charming to see you, Retief," Shinth whispered. "One is always delighted to entertain a colleague, of course. You'll forgive Captain Thilf's zeal in insisting so firmly on your acceptance of my hospitality—but he was quite carried away by your demonstration of interest in Groacian affairs."

"I'm surprised at your Excellency's leniency," Retief replied in tones of mild congratulation. "I assumed you'd have busted the captain back to corporal by now for tipping your hand. There's nothing like diplomat-napping to cause vague suspicions to congeal into certainties."

Shinth waved a negligent member. "Any reasonably intelligent being—I include Terry diplomats as a courtesy—could have deduced a connection between the vanished structure and myself."

"Oh-oh—I nink I thow what was tunder that arp!" Chauncey exclaimed in a voice muffled by the multiple turns of eyestalk inhibiting his vocal apparatus.

"You see—even this unlettered local perceives that there was only one place where a borrowed ballet theater might be concealed," Shinth continued airily. "Specifically, under the canvas stretched over my dummy stadium."

"Since we agree that's obvious," Retief said, "suppose you assign a squad to untying the knots in Chauncey, while Captain Thilf and ourselves enjoy a hearty diplomatic chuckle over the joke."

"Ah, but the punchline has yet to be delivered," Shinth demurred. "You don't suppose, my dear Retief, that I've devoted all these months to the finesse merely for the amusement of newly arrived Terry bureaucrats?"

"It seems rather a flimsy motivation," Retief concurred. "But you can't hide half a million cubic feet of stolen architecture forever."

"Nor do I intend to try. Only a few hours remain before the full scope of my coup bursts upon the local diplomatic horizon." The Groaci adjusted his facial plates in an arrangement expressing bland self-satisfaction. "You'll recall that I've advanced the schedule for the unveiling of Groaci's gift to the Squalian electorate. The heart-warming event will take place tonight, before the massed dignitaries of the planet, with the Terry Mission as prominent guests, of course. Our hosts, expecting the traditional Groaci ballet theater, will suffer no surprise. That emotion will be reserved to the Terrans, to whom I've carefully leaked the erroneous impression that a ballpark was rising on the site. At a stroke, I will reveal you Terries for the Indian givers you are, while at the same moment bestowing on the local bucolics imposing evidence of Groacian generosity—at the expense of you Soft Ones! A classic gambit, indeed, as I'm sure you'll agree, eh, Retief?"

"Ambassador Grossblunder might have a few objections to the scheme," Retief pointed out.

"Let him object," Shinth whispered carelessly. "The operation was carried off under cover of night, unseen and unheard. The lift units left the planet today via our supply shuttle. What matter substanceless accusations? Grossblunder was thoughtful enough to carry on erection under heavy security wraps; it will be his word against mine. And a ballet theater on the site is worth two in the Project Proposal folder, eh?"

"You won't wet agay with it," Chauncey blurted. "I'll bill the speans."

"Bill whatever you like, fellow," Shinth said loftily. "*Ex post facto* rumor-mongering will have no affect on a *fait accompli.* And now, I really must be robing myself for the festivities." He snapped an eyelid at the guard captain. "Escort them to the guest quarters, Thilf, and see that they're made as comfortable as possible during their stay. I believe from the tower they'll have a splendid view of the spectacle under the lights."

"To defenestrate the rogues at once," Thilf suggested in a stage whisper. "To eliminate the blabbermouths completely—"

"To be silent, litter-mate of drones," the Ambassador hissed. "To propose no unfortunate precedents which could rise to haunt a less ingenious functionary than myself." He waggled three of his five oculars at Retief in a placating fashion. "You'll be free to return to your duties—as soon as the ceremony is completed," he cooed. "In the meantime—happy meditations."

"ITHALWAYS ought that stiguring out who loll the foote

was the pard hart," Chauncey mourned as the door to the tower apartment slammed on them. "We know shoo hiped it, and hair they wid it—and a lat got of food it does us."

"Shinth seems to have worked things out with considerable care," Retief agreed.

"Luff tuck," Chauncey commiserated. "I sate to hee those feepy little crive-eyes tut one over on you Perries."

'Well, Chauncey, I'm glad to know you feel kindly disposed toward us."

"It's thot nat, exactly," the Squalian said. "It's bust I had a jet bown with my dookie." He sighed. "Well, you can't wick a pinner every time."

"Maybe our side hasn't lost yet," Retief said. "Chauncey, how are you at poking around in dark places?"

"Just untie a nupple of these cots those guise wise sued in my tiedopodia and I'll dee what I can sue."

Retief set to work; ten minutes later, with a groan of relief, the Squalian withdrew the last yard of himself from the final knot.

"Peether, what an exbrothience," he sighed. "Wust jate until I get a lupple of coops around that nise-guy's weck—" He writhed inside his polyon coverall, redistributing his bulk equitably among the sleeves and legs thereof. "And I've shost my looze," he lamented. "Nazzy snumbers, they were, bright with wown ting-wips," he added.

Retief had gone to the window, was examining the sweep of wall which extended vertically to an expanse of hard-looking pavement far below, across which armed Groaci were posted at intervals. Chauncey came over to peer out past him.

"Forget it," he said. "You clan't cimb down there. And if you could, the nards would gab you. But jet's lust see if there's a lonn in here—" He prowled across to a connecting door, poked his head inside the bathroom.

"Daypirt," he exclaimed. "The gums boofed when they esterundimated a Squalian. Thawch wiss." He extruded a stalked eye, plunged it into the bowl; yard after yard of pencil-thick filament followed, paying out smoothly down the drain.

"Oh, boy," Chauncey said happily. "Will those toobs be bartled when I tit in gutch with an out on the palside. All I dot to goo is reach the plewage sant, gook around for a lie I know and—" Chauncey went rigid. "Oh-oh," he said. He planted his feet—rather loosely organized in the absence of shoes—and pulled backward. The extended cable of protoplasm stretched, but failed to yield.

"Why, the dirty, skousy lunks!" he squalled. "Way were thaiting! Gray thabbed me and nide me in

another tot! I can't foe any garther and I can't get gack!"

"Tough break," Retief said. "But can't you just slide the rest of you down the line?"

"Bat, and awondan a sellow-fufferer?" Chauncey replied indignantly. "Besides, my integnal internaments gon't woe through the pipe."

"Looks like they've outthought us again, Chauncey."

"Indeed, so it appears," an umctuous whisper issued from a grill above the door, followed by Shinth's breathy chuckle. "Pity about the clogged drains; I'll have a chap along with a plunger in the morning."

"Hey—that posy narker can weir every herd we say," the Squalian exclaimed. "A dreaves-opper, yet!"

Retief went to the door and shot the heavy bolt, securing it from the inside. He caught the chauffeur's remaining eye and winked.

"Looks like Ambassador Shinth wins," he said. "He was just too smart for us, Chauncey. I suppose he knows all about the bomb we planted in his Embassy, too—"

"What's that? A bomb? In my Embassy?" Shinth's voice rasped in sudden alarm. "Where? I insist you tell me at once!"

"Don't tell him, Chauncey," Retief said quickly. "It's set to go off in eight minutes; he'll never find it in time."

There was a sibilant gasp from the intercom, followed by feeble Groaic shouts. Moments later, feet clattered in the passage beyond the door. The latch rattled. Fists pounded.

"What do you mean, locked from the inside?" Shinth's voice was audible through the panel.

"Seven minutes," Retief called. "Chins up, Chauncey. It will all be over soon."

"To flee at once!" Captain Thilf's thin tones squalled. "To leave the dastards here to die!"

"Retief—tell me where the bomb is and I'll put in a word for you with your chief!" Shinth called through the door. "I'll explain you shouldn't be judged too harshly for bungling your assignment; after all, a mere Terran, pitted against a mind like mine—"

"That's good of you, Mr. Ambassador—but I'm afraid duty demands we stay here—even if it means being blown up along with your voucher files."

"My final offer, Retief. Emerge and defuse the infernal machine and I'll help you blow up the Terry Embassy, thereby destroying the unfavorable E.R. your shabby role in the present contretemps will doubtless earn for you."

"That's a most undiplomatic suggestion, Mr. Ambassador."

"Very well then, self-doomed one. To learn the meaning of Groaci wrath. To watch as I evacuate the premises, leaving you and your toady to your fates."

Retief and Chauncey listened to the sound of retreating footsteps. They watched from the window as Shinth darted forth, crossed the courtyard at a brisk run, followed by his entire staff, the last of whom paused to lock the door behind him.

"I adfun that was a lot of mit." The Squalian broke the profound silence that fell after the last of the Groaci had departed. "But in mix senutes they'll dealize they been ruped. So put's the woint?"

"The point is that I'll have six undisturbed minutes inside the Groaci Chancery," Retief said, unlocking the door. "Fold the hort until I get back."

IT WAS ten minutes before Retief reentered the room, locking the door behind him. Thirty seconds later Shinth's voice sounded via intercom, keening imprecations.

"Thilf! To batter the door down, to take vengeance on the Soft One for making a jackass out of me in full view of my underlings—"

"Instead, to hasten to the scene of the up-coming ceremony, Exalted One," the guard captain caviled. "Otherwise, to miss the big moment."

"To myself attend the unveiling, whilst you deal with the evildoers."

"To grasp the implication that I am to take whatever action seems appropriate to deal with the interlopers?" Thilf inquired in this unctuous whisper.

"To ask no foolish questions," Shinth snapped. "The impossibility of permitting the lesser beings to survive to spread abroad reports prejudicial to the dignity of the Groacian state!"

"To see eyeball to eyeball with your Excellency," Thilf murmured.

"That's a bot of eyelalls," Chauncey commented. "Well, Mr. Retief, it was a farrel of bun lyle it wasted but I kess it's gurtains now." He twitched violently as an axe *thunked* into the door, causing it to jump in its frame. Retief was at the window, stripping off his powder-blue early-evening informal blazer.

"Chauncey, how much stretch do you have left?" he asked over the battering at the door.

"Hmmm, I gee what you've sot in mind. I'll dee what I can sue—" Chauncey unlimbered a length of tough cable from his left sleeve, sent it over the sill; his coverall hung more and more loosely as he paid out coil after coil of himself.

"There's thuch a sing as oving getter-extended," he panted; by this time his garment hung limply on a single thumb-sized strand that extended from the water closet around the door jamb, across the room and down into the darkness below.

"Can you handle my weight all right?"

"Sure; in yast lear's intermurals

I tested out at over talf a hon per air squinch."

"Tell me exactly where the other end of you is trapped."

Chauncey complied. As Retief threw a leg over the sill torches flared in the courtyard below. The Groaci Ambassador appeared, clad in full ceremonials, consisting of a ribbed cloak, pink and green argyles and a tricorner hat. Jeweled eye shields winked on each of his five stalked oculárs. His four-Groaci honor guard trailed him through the gate and piled into the official limousine, which pulled away from the curb with a snarl of abused gyros.

"Thell, wat's wat," Chauncey said dejectedly, in a tight-stretched voice that emanated from the slight bulge that represented hit vital centers. "He's on his say to the weremoney; in atither nun minutes it'll be ove aller."

"So it will," Retief agreed. "And we want to be there to see it, eh, Chauncey?"

"Why? If there's hateything I an, it's a leerful chooser."

"I don't think there's much danger of your seeing one of those tonight," Retief said; he gripped the warm, leathery rope of living flesh and started down.

FIFTEEN feet above the cobbles the cable ended. Retief looked down, gauging the drop. At that moment the door below him opened and two tardy guards emerged at a trot, adjusting their accouterments on the run. One happened to cock an eye upward, saw Retief, skidded to a halt, dropping his ceremonial pike with a clatter. The other uttered a hiss, swung his sharp-pointed spear around and upward.

Retief dropped, sending the Groaci spinning. He rolled to his feet, sprinted for the corner of the courtyard where the drain emerged. Chauncey's mournful blue eye gazed at him apprehensively from atop the large bowknot into which the extended stalk had been tied. Hastily, but with care, Retief set to work to untie it. Weak Groaci shouts sounded from behind him. More armed aliens emerged into the courtyard; more lights winked on, weak and yellowish in deference to the sensitive Groaci vision, but adequate to reveal the Terran crouched in the far corner. Retief looked around to see Captain Thilf charging down at the head of a flying wedge of pikemen. With a final tug he slipped the knot, saw Chauncey's eye disappear back into the drain. He ducked a thrown spear, heard Thilf hiss an order. The Groaci guards ringed him in, their gleaming spearpoints bristling inches from his chest. The captain pushed through, stood in an arrogant pose before his captive.

"So—the infamous wrecker and vile persecutor of peace-loving

arthropods is brought to bay at last, eh?" he whispered, signaling to a small, non-uniformed Groaci lugging a lensed black box. "To get a few shots of me shaking a finger under his proboscis," he directed the photographer. "To preserve this moment for posterity, before we impale him."

"A little to the right, your captaincy," the civilian suggested. "To tell the Soft One to crouch a trifle, so I can get both of you in the same frame."

"Better still, to order it to lie on its back so the captain can put a foot on its chest," a corporal offered.

"To hand me a spear and to clear these enlisted men from the scene," Thilf ordered. "To not confuse the clear-cut image of my triumph with extraneous elements."

The guards obediently backed off a few paces; Thilf poked his borrowed pike at Retief's chest.

"To assume a placating posture," he ordered, prodding the prisoner lightly. Abruptly the captain's expression changed as a sinuous loop of tough-looking rope shot out of darkness and whipped around his slender neck. All five eyes shot erect, causing two of his semi-VIP zircon eyeshields to fall with a tiny clatter. Retief snapped the spear from the stricken officer's hands and reversed it. The encircling guards jumped forward, weapons poised; Thilf seemed to leap suddenly backward, to burst through their ranks and hurtle across the courtyard, heels dragging. Half his spearmen gaped after him as the other half closed in on Retief with raised pikes.

"Drop those stig-pickers!" Chauncey's voice sounded from the window above, "or I'll hop your boss on his dread!"

The Groaci whirled to see their captain dangling by one leg, twenty feet above the pavement.

"To get a shot of this," Retief suggested to the photographer, "to send home to his family. They'll be pleased to see him hanging around in such distinguished company."

"Help!" Thilf keened. "To do something, culling-season rejects, or to be pegged out in the pleasure pits!"

"To be in the chicken noodle whatever we do," a sergeant muttered, waving the pikewielders back.

"Mr. Retief," Chauncey called. "Shall I nop him on his drob, or bust jash his brocks out on the rain?"

"I propose a compromise, Captain," Retief called. "Instruct your lads to escort us out of here and Chauncey will leave your internal arrangements intact."

"To never yield—" Thilf started—and uttered a thin shriek as the Squalian allowed him to fall a yard, or two, caught him in mid-

air and hoisted him up once more.

"But on the other hand, to what end to die in the moment of victory?" the captain inquired reasonably, if shakily. "To be nothing the meatfaced one can do now to half the unveiling."

"To stick this Terry and take the consequences," a corporal suggested furtively to the sergeant. "To suffer the loss of the captain philosophically."

A flash-bulb winked. "To not worry," the cameraman said blandly. "To distribute a few prints here and there if His Captaincy tries to throw his weight around."

The sergeant signaled; the Groaci formed up in two ranks, spears grounded. He motioned Retief through.

"To leave by the side exit," he said. "And to not hurry back."

"Better hand me your side arm," Retief suggested. The NCO complied silently. Retief backed to the gate.

"See you outside, Chauncey," he called. "And hurry it up—we're on a tight schedule."

IV

"SHOE would have lean the sook on his face when I deft him langling from a fedge lifty feet up," Chauncey was saying exuberantly as he gunned the car along the wet night street of the Squalian capital. "The dubby dirtle-crossers were baiting weside the drain for me to lawl out in their craps; fut I booled 'em; I shook a tort-cut through the teptic sank and out-ranked the flascals."

"A neat manuver," Retief congratulated his ally as the latter wrenched the vehicle around a corner with a deafening hiss of steering jets. Just ahead, a clump of Terran officials stood under the marquee of the Terran Embassy. The car slid to a halt behind the gleaming black Embassy limousine. Magnan leaped forward as Retief stepped out.

"Disaster!" he moaned. "Ambassador Grossblunder got back half an hour ago; he was furious when I told him about the Groaci unveiling their project at midnight—so he ordered our Grand Opening moved up to 11:59 tonight! He'll be down in a moment in full formal regalia, with all media in attendance, on his way to upstage Shinth. When those drapes are drawn back to reveal nothing but a yawning pit—" Magnan broke off at a stir behind him.

The imposing figure of the Terrestrial Ambassador appeared, flanked by a covey of bureaucrats. Magnan uttered a stifled wail and scuttled to attend his chief. Retief stepped to the limousine chauffer's window.

"Drive straight to the Groaci project site, Humphrey," he ordered. "Make it snappy."

"Mate a winute," the Squalian demurred. "Master Mignan distoldly stink me to drive to the Serry tight—"

"Change in plan."

"Well—ohsay if you kay so," the driver grunted. "Wish somebody'd mind up their makes."

As the limousine pulled away, Retief jumped back into the staff car.

"Follow them, Chauncey," he said. "By the way, with that versatile sound-effects apparatus of yours, how are you at impersonations?"

"Nitty prifty, Chief, if I sue day so myself. Thet giss: it's a Baffolian bog-fellow crying for his mate—"

"Later, Chauncey. Can you do Ambassador Grossblunder?"

"Just between the tee of us, me and the boys have a lillion maffs taping the old boy's owns."

"Let's hear you do Shinth."

"Lessee: *To joil in your own booses, tile Verry* . . . How's that?"

"It'll have to do, Chauncey," Retief said. "Now, here's what I want you to do . . . "

"WHAT'S this?" Ambassador Grossblunder was rumbling as Retief joined the Terran delegation alighting before the bunting-draped, flood-lit entry to the tarpaulin-covered structure looming against the dark Squalian sky. "This doesn't look like—" he broke off as Ambassador Shinth appeared from among a crowd of retainers and local notables.

"Good lord," Magnan gasped, noting for the first time where the limousine had delivered them. "Your Excellency—there's been a mistake—"

"Ah, so delighted to see you, Mr. Ambassador," the Groaci Chief of Mission murmurred. "Good of your Excellency to honor the occasion with your august presence. I'm delighted to see you hold no narrow-minded grudge, merely because I've bested you in our friendly little competition."

"Hah!" the bulky Terran snorted. "Your effrontery will backfire when the Prime Minister and Cabinet are offered nothing but a set of badly cured foundations, after all this empty fanfare."

"*Au contraire*, Mr. Ambassador," Shinth replied coolly. "The edifice is complete, even to the pennants atop the decorative minarets, a glowing tribute to Groaci ingenuity which will forever establish in the minds of our hosts an unforgettable image of the largesse-bestowing powers of the Groacian State."

"Nonsense, Shinth. A confidential source has kept me well abreast of your progress; as of yesterday, your so-called project hadn't gotten off the ground."

"I assure you the deficiency has been rectified. And now we'd best

be nipping along to the reviewing stand; the moment of truth approaches."

"Magnan," Grossblunder said behind his hand. "Did he say pennants atop the minarets? I thought that was one of the unique details of our project."

"Why, what a coincidence," Magnan quavered.

"Ah, there, Fenwick," a deep purple Squalian in heavily brocaded robes loomed out of the drizzle before the Terran Ambassador. The local's already imposing bulk was enhanced by the ropes of pearls and golden chains intertwined with his somatic elements, producing an effect like an immense plate of multi-colored lasagna. "I hardly exceeded to speck you here. An inspaying displire of inter-aiming specity!"

Grossblunder harrumphed, clasping the proffered bundle of Prime Ministerial tissues in a parody of a handshake. "Yes, well, as to that—"

"You'll poin my jarty, of course?" the Squalian Chief Executive urged cordially, turning away. "Pee you on the sodium."

Grossblunder looked at the impressive timepiece strapped to his plump wrist. "Hmmph!" he muttered to Magnan. "We may as well. It's too late now for me to stage my unveiling ahead of Shinth, a grave disappointment, regarding which I'll have words with you later."

"Retief," Magnan hissed as they accompanied the group toward the brightly lit platform. "If we slip away now we may be able to sign on as oilers on that tramp freighter I saw at the port this afternoon. It looked unsavory enough for its skipper to be willing to dispense with technicalities—"

"Don't do anything hasty, Mr. Magnan," Retief advised. "Just play it by ear—and be ready to pick up any dropped cues."

On the platform, Retief took a position at Ambassador Shinth's bony elbow. The Groaci gave a startled twitch when he saw him.

"Captain Thilf didn't want me to miss anything," Retief said. "He decided to let me go after all."

"You dare to show your face here, after assaulting my—"

"Kidnappers?" Retief suggested. "I thought under the circumstances perhaps we could agree to forget the whole incident, Mr. Ambassador."

"Hmm. Perhaps it would be as well. I suppose my role might be subject to misinterpretation—" Shinth turned away as the orchestra, composed of two dozen Squalians doubling as brass and strings, struck up a rousing medley of classic Elvis Presley themes. As the music ended a spotlight speared out, highlighting the slender figure of the Groaci Ambassador.

"Mr. Prime Minister," he began, his breathy voice rasping in

the PA system. "It gives me great pleasure—"

RETIEF made an unobtrusive signal; an inconspicuous strand of pale purple that had glided snake-like across the platform slithered up behind Shinth, and unseen by any but Retief, deftly whipped around the Groaci's spindly neck, quite invisible under the elaborate ruffs sported by the diplomat.

A soft croak issued from the speakers spaced around the plaza. Then the voice resumed.

"It grates me pleazh givver, as I was saying, to tray pibute to my escolled teamleague, Amblunder Grossbaster, by ungaling the Verran tift to the palion Squeeple." The Groaci's spindly arm, assisted by a tough length of Chauncey, reached out and yanked the tripline holding the tarps in place.

"What in the world did he say?" Grossblunder growled. "I had the distinct impression he called me something unprintable—" He interrupted himself as the canvas tumbled away from the structure to reveal the baroque pile dazzling under the lights, pennants awave from the minarets.

"Why—that's *my* Bolshoi-type ballet theater!" Grossblunder blurted.

"And a glendid spift it is, too, Fenwick," the Prime Minister exclaimed, seizing his hand. "But I'm a fit conbused—I was inder the umpression this decereful little lightemony was arranged by Amshisiter Balth—"

"Merely a bit of artful misdirection to keep your Excellency in suspense, ha-ha," Magnan improvished hastily.

"You mean—this strendid splucture is a sift from the GDT?" the PM expressed confusion by writhing his features dizzyingly. "But I had a direct stinkollection of ceding the site to the Groaci Mission—"

"Magnan," Grossblunder hissed "What's going on here?"

As Magnan stuttered, Retief stepped forward, offering a bulky parchment, elaborately sealed and red-taped. Grossblunder tore it open and stared at the Gothic lettering.

"Magnan, you rascal! You staged all this mummery just to add an element of suspense to the proceedings, eh?"

"Whom—I—your Excellency?" Magnan croaked.

"Don't be bashful, my boy." Grossblunder poked a meaty finger into Magnan's ribs. "I'm delighted! About time someone enlivened the proceedings." His eye fell on Shinth, whose body was twitching in a curious rhythm, while his eye stalks waved in no discernible pattern. "Even my Groaci colleague seems caught up in the spirit of the moment," he boomed heartily. "Well, in response I suppose we can hardly

fail to reciprocate in the same spirit. I suggest we all troupe off now to witness the presentation of the Groaci project, eh?"

"Laybe mater," a faint voice croaked. "Night row I got to boe to the gathroom." Shinth turned stiffly and tottered away amid shouts, flashbulbs, bursting skyrockets, and a stirring rendition of the *Dead March* from Saul.

"Retief," Magnan gasped as the Ambassador and the PM moved off, chatting cordially. "What? How—"

"It was a little too late to steal the building back," Retief said. "I did the next best thing and stole the deed to the property."

"I STILL feel we're skating on very thin ice," Magnan said, lifting a plain ginger ale from the tray proffered by a passing waiter. He cast a worried eye across the crowded lounge toward Ambassador Grossblunder. "If he ever finds out how close we came to having to write a Report of Survey on one Ballet Theater—and that you violated the Groaci Embassy and stole official documents—and that one of our drivers laid the equivalent of hands on the person of Shinth himself—" he broke off as the slight figure of the Groaci Ambassador appeared at the entry beside them, his finery in a state of disarray, his eyes canted at an outraged angle.

"Good lord," Magnan gasped. "I wonder if it's too late to catch that freighter?"

"Thievery," Shinth hissed, catching sight of Retief. "Assault! Mayhem! Treachery!"

"I'll drink to that," a portly diplomat said blurrily, raising his glass.

"Ah, there, Shinth," Grossblunder boomed, advancing through the press like an icebreaker entering Cartwright Bay. "Delighted you decided to drop by—"

"Save your unction," the Groaci hissed. "I am here to call to your attention the actions of that one." he pointed a trembling digit at Retief. Grossblunder frowned at the latter.

"Yes—you're the fellow who carries my briefcase," he started. "What—"

There was a sudden soft thump, merged with a metallic clatter, Grossblunder looked down. On the polished floor between his feet and those of the Groaci were spread several hundred chrome-plated paper clips.

"Oh, did you drop something, your Excellency?" Magnan chirped.

"So!" Grossblunder bellowed, his face purpling to a shade which aroused a murmur of admiring comment from the Squalian bearers gathering to observe the byplay.

"Why, however did those paper

clips get into my pocket?" Shinth wondered aloud, but without conviction.

"Ha!" Grossblunder roared. "So that's what you were after, eh? I should have known—"

"Bah!" Shinth responded with a show of spirit. "What matter a few modest souvenirs in the light of the depradations of—"

"Few? You call sixty-seven gross a few?"

Shinth looked startled. "How did you—that is to say, I absolutely deny—"

"Save your denials, Shinth!" Grossblunder drowned the Groaci out. "I intend to prosecute—"

"I came here to speak of grand larceny," Shinth cut in, attempting to regain the iniative. "Breaking and entering! Assault and battery!"

"Decided to make a clean breast of it, eh?" Grossblunder boomed. "That will be in your favor at the trial."

"Sir," Magnan whispered urgently. "In view of Ambassador Shinth's magnanimous blunder—I mean gesture—earlier in the evening, don't you think it might be possible to overlook this undeniable evidence of red-handed theft? We could charge the paper clips up to representational expenses, along with the liquor."

"It was his doing!" Shinth pointed past Magnan at Retief.

"You must be confused," Grossblunder said in surprise. "That's just the fellow who carries my briefcase. Magnan is the officer in charge of the investigation. His harassment got to you, eh, Shinth? Conscience found you out at last. Well, as Magnan suggests, I suppose I could be lenient just this once. But that's one you owe me—" Grossblunder clapped the Groaci on his narrow back, urging him toward the nearest punchbowl.

"Heavens," Magnan breathed to Retief. "What a stroke of luck! But I'm astonished Shinth could have been so incautious as to bring his loot along to the reception."

"He didn't," Retief said. "I planted it on him."

"Retief—you didn't—"

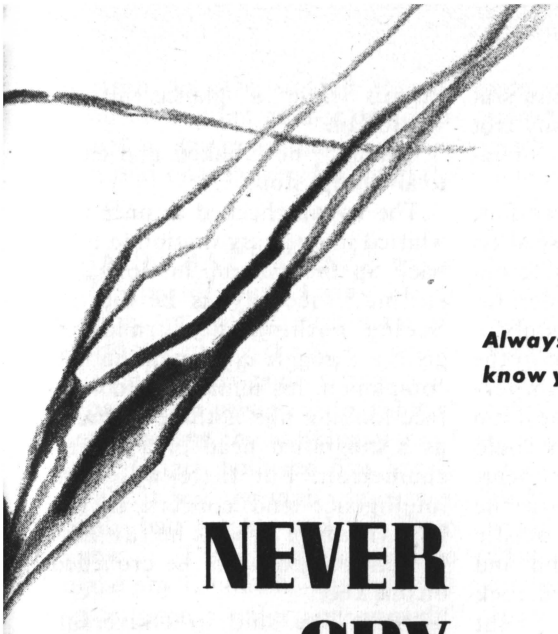
"Afraid so, Mr. Magnan."

"But—in that case, the paper clip thefts are still unsolved—and his Groacian Excellency is being unjustly blamed."

"Not exactly; I found the sixty-seven gross stashed in his office, concealed under a flower box full of jelly-blossoms."

"Good lord—" Magnan took out a scented tissue and mopped at his temples. "Imagine having to lie, cheat and steal, just to do a little good in the world. There are times when I think the diplomatic life is almost too much for me."

"Funny thing," Retief said, easing a Bacchus brandy from a passing tray. "There are times when to me it seems hardly enough." •



Always know your enemy—but know yourself even better!

NEVER CRY HUMAN

STERLING E. LANIER

I

THE great blue sun was a long way from the planet called after it, Origen VII. As he ran heavily over the hot sand under its glare, William Powers, Field Agent of Survey and Contact Bureau, Syrian Combine, thanked the One God that its heat was no worse. It barely approximated 105° F on Terra. Even so, only Powers'

superb condition enabled him still to keep moving at the steady trot he was forcing himself to maintain.

Beside him the lean, seven-foot form of his Lyran partner sped on with no visible effort, flexible tail streaming behind him, slender five-clawed toes making only a faint rustle in the black sand of the canyon's floor, a noise imperceptible to anyone but the man running beside him. Powers could barely hear the thud of his heart but he had no trouble with the crunch of his feet as the plastic sandals bit into the ground and occasional patches of naked rock over which the two ran. Sweat poured from his nearly naked body. It was kept from his eyes by a crude headband, hastily made of cloth torn from the coat of his vanished uniform. Other than this, sandals and his calf-length service pants, he wore nothing at all.

In the waste all was still save for the two running figures. Above them, on both sides, the towering walls of the mighty gorge rose sheer and stark, black and red rock making a pattern of ferocious beauty. Except for an occasional gray cactus—like shrub clinging to the rock or rooted in some crevice, no vegetation was visible. Down the almost straight hundred-foot width of the canyon floor the two ran, as if competing in some strange contest.

In another quarter of a mile Powers stole a glance at his wristchron.

"Break," he croaked and came to an abrupt stop.

The Lyran checked at once and whirled in one easy motion to look back up the canyon, his long tail curling gracefully as he did so. Seeing nothing, he turned his great red goggle eyes on his human companion, his immobile, snouted face looking like nothing as much as a magnified head of a Terran chameleon. But there was both intelligence and concern in the huge, lambent orbs as he saw how Powers panted while he crouched on one knee.

"Bill," he said in Universal, making it sound more like *Hipeel,* "you don't look so good. Can you last much longer?"

"Why in hell, you overgrown skink, you don't get out of here, is beyond me," gasped Powers. "How much water you got left?"

The Lyran examined the skin water bag slung over one bony shoulder.

"Maybe a quart. Maybe a touch more. Want some?"

"Yeah," said the man, holding up one hand for the water. He drank rapid gulps of the muddy, lukewarm fluid and handed the skin back in silence. The olive-scaled Lyran stood above him, lean double-ankled legs locked as he braced himself on his long stiffened tail, the whole forming a rigid triangle on which to rest. In this

portion he also shaded Powers from the sun but neither one mentioned it, any more than he did the fact that only Powers had used the water.

SAHK MAZZECHAZZ was a native of Beta Lyrae IV or Zzorm, an ancient, arid planet, a world not unlike the Karoo desert of Southern Africa over much of its expanse. He needed little water at any time and the hot blue glare of giant Origen bothered him hardly at all. It was the man who was in really bad trouble and they both knew it. There was no need to make any comment. The help was an automatic reflex and on a different, perhaps wetter, world, would have been as freely given in reverse.

Powers' breath had subsided to normal and he checked his chron again.

"Let's go," he said, coming to his feet. "I've had five minutes and we haven't got time to hang around. We don't know what those hellions turned loose after us. We only have the one chance and we need cover."

"Quiet a moment, please," said the Lyran. He was now standing fully erect and his broad, plate-like tympanum surfaces, far more sensitive than human ears to vibration, were quivering as he strained to catch a sound. Powers waited, also staring up canyon. He could see and hear nothing. The shimmering haze, caused by heat reflected off the rocks and sand, made visibility almost nil more than two hundred yards away.

"Yes," said Mazzechazz after a moment. "Something comes, something large and with many limbs, my friend. We had best resume our journey. We can do nothing here."

The two began to run down canyon again, their eyes ceaselessly scanning the terrain ahead and on either side. They needed an ambush spot, anything at all that would give them a chance against whatever horror had been loosed on their trail. A chance to use their one weapon.

As he ran Powers cursed the grim humor of the Arghor war chiefs to himself, not for the first time. They had carefully deprived the two agents of all their weapons, even down to knives, leaving them only a food pack, water and a limited amount of clothing. Two items of Powers' personal jewelry had been overlooked or considered unimportant. One was his wristchron, the other the large Space Academy ring he wore, set with a green stone. Next, the Arghor had left them at the head of the great gorge and told them to run.

"One comes perhaps, whom it would not be well to meet," the oldest chief had growled jovially and all the surrounding warriors had yelped in what passed for de-

lighted laughter, some even slapping their black-furred thighs in a fair approximation of mirth.

For the tenth time since their capture at the end of the previous night, Powers had, with dignity, pointed out that he and the Lyran had the status of ambassadors and that the sky gods would curse any who harmed such.

"We have harmed no one, Sky-dweller," snarled the old chief venomously. "You came unasked, out of nowhere, on behalf of other irreligious, muck-eating monsters like yourselves down on the plain yonder. Whom we will kill in due course. You claim to be heralds, ambassadors? We asked for none, nor were we asked by your people to receive any. We found you at night lurking on our land near your sky machine, doubtless engaged in some vile sky-people plot. We could kill you at once without losing honor. This one with you looks like an evil spirit.

"But you are heralds, you say? Perhaps. We will release you then. If you are true warriors you need no cowardly death beams," and he pointed a massive, pelted hand at the two Ferraby handlasers lying on the ground.

"Let us have our knives then, Eldest," rejoined Powers, staring impassively into the angry yellow eyes. "If you leave us defenseless entirely, then who will be the coward?"

"No!" roared the angry old chief. Standing so close to Powers that his sharp-snouted, hairy face was only inches away. "No—we give you a chance for life, no more. You deserve no more, like all the dirty leaf and root eaters in your tribe. If you are true people, true hunters, make the most of it and save yourselves. Otherwise, die here and now."

"We are ready," interrupted the Lyran. He had been standing, arms folded, not speaking, while Powers argued. Now he took Powers by the arm and gently pulled him back.

The Unitrans machine which had taught them both to speak the Arghor dialect could not help to make the barks, growls and grunts as fluent for the reptilian mouth of the Lyran, but the tribemen nevertheless fell silent when he spoke. Humans they were used to seeing, but Mazzechazz was uncanny, and the fact that he could speak to them in their own tongue made them even more nervous. They were not afraid, exactly, but there was a grudging respect in their attitute toward the towering lizard shape that was absent in their attitude toward Powers.

"Go then," grunted the old chief, "You have been given food and a skin of water. If you escape from the Hunter of the Sands we will kill you later—but in fair fight. Now go."

Powers turned and followed his

partner down the crude vine ladder to the canyon floor far below. At the bottom he looked up, expecting to see the assembled tribe gazing down, prick-eared in the clear light of the coming dawn. But the ladder was hauled up by invisible hands and then there was nothing. The Arghors had vanished, apparently uninterested.

"I think we had better run, friend," said Mazzechazz gently, taking the unspoken thought from his mind. "They surely would like to see us die—and that means they are probably extremely scared of what's coming. They are not hanging around to see how we'll make out."

•

NOW, three hours later, they had been running, running and running, thought Powers. And still they had found no position for making a stand. The level bottom of the canyon had stayed smooth, large, flat rocks alternating with fine gravel and sand, but with no break or usable crevice in the towering walls. The gentle downward slope never varied or ceased. Only the timed rests and his iron will had kept Powers from collapsing, but Sakh Mazzechazz could still go a long way. Powers knew that the big Lyran ought to have left him but he had given up arguing. The other had made it plain that he was not going to desert his partner for any reason whatsoever, mission or no mission.

As he pounded grimly and undeviatingly along, Powers tried to keep his mind off his straining muscles and laboring breath by recasting the events of the past few cycles in his mind. Everything had happened quickly—too quickly.

While returning from a pirate scan near the outer Magellanies he and his teammate, Mazzechazz, had been beeped by a subdimensional probe, matching velocities with their two-man, deep-space *Farover*. The powered message capsule, actually a tiny ship keyed to a molecular frequency in their own vessel's construction, had been taken aboard, stored for return to base, its coded contents read.

The message had come through the subspace dimension from H.Q. on Sirius Prime. It seemed that no word had been received for three weeks, Universal time, from a new human colony on a Terra-type world called Origen VII.

The colony was one of the products of an influential religious body, the Methodist Revival Templars, a group originating on old Terra in the distant past, still with Terran headquarters, but powerful on other worlds also. The Templars were ancient Christian in their remote antecedents and gave their clergy a lot of authority. A strongly pacific—even pacifist—sect, they

had a previous record of planting useful and healthy colonies on a number of worlds suitable for agriculture. They did not despise scientific technology but favored the simple life.

Although the colony was human, the native inhabitants of Origen VII were not, although they were classified as clearly mammalian. Pictures and data on the planet, its ecology, resources and all other pertinent matters were included in the message. The Templar colony had been supposed to report twice a (Universal) week, but via sub-space radio, not capsule. Mission for Powers and Mazzechazz: Go find out what was wrong and either report or take appropriate action. Coordinates were given. That was all.

THE silent colony on Origen VII proved easy enough to locate. Set in a valley at the base of a mountainous and rugged peninsula on the larger of the two northern continents, it could be picked up easily on a clear night by its blaze of light. No natural satellite circled the planet to give light and the glow of the settlement was very plain. *Farover* landed easily, flickering out of the black sky into a glare of flood lights at the edge of what quickly revealed itself as a brand-new, defensive perimeter.

Heavily armed men, their faces haggard with strain, had swarmed around the ship as soon as it touched down. On emergence, the two Survey agents were caught up in a babbling crowd of excited people, all talking at once and were rushed almost off their feet to the office of the colony's governor, who was also its chief priest. Behind them as they went, Powers noticed guards digging still more trenches and laying wire around the S. and C. ship, enclosing it in the zone of defense.

When all others but the six members of the governor's council had been excluded and a guard had been posted outside, the two agents were finally able to ask questions. At least, so they thought.

Governor Halk Tahira, Presbyter of the Faith, was a man of late middle age and, if Powers were any judge, late middling experience and intelligence as well. He had been ready to explode for days and waited no longer.

"Do you know what's been going on here?" he had shouted rhetorically. "This place was cleared, pronounced safe by all official sources. Safe and harmless! The natives were listed as 'primitive, semi-nomadic indigenes, mammalian type, humanoid in structure and intelligence and friendly to outside contacts!' Friendly! Humanoid! That's what the official report said. "Do you know what we call this place? Wolf World!"

He had raved on. And since

Powers and Mazzechazz were learning something from his attitude they made no move to interrupt. Finally he ran down, more from lack of wind than emotion and the real questions started. Allowing for hysteria and shock, what had been allowed to happen seemed bad enough, in all truth. Someone, and it looked like Survey and Contact, which bore the responsibility for the first reports, had goofed, but good.

The natives of Origen VII were semi-nomadic all right—carnivores at various levels of Stone Age culture, who ate nothing but meat unless literally starving. Cannibalism was usually a matter of ritual but perfectly acceptable if the meat were an enemy warrior of one's one tribal group. The planet provided a variety of environments, all of them swarming with large and small game. Most of the big game animals and their attendant predators were highly dangerous themselves. You worked for your dinner.

At first friendly enough, the natives had swiftly become contemptuous on discovering that the humans were omnivores whose basic diet was vegetable, who did not eat each other and failed to see hand-to-hand combat as the only hobby for an idle moment.

The natives were erect, bipedal and possessed five digits on what a zoologist would style *manus* and *pes* or hand and foot. Opposable thumbs were present.

In general appearance and at a fast look the natives resembled nothing so much as human-sized, black dogs walking upright, although they wore harnesses of leather and made sophisticated bone and stone tools. They lived in palisaded villages, used fire and were quite as intelligent as any member race of the Syrian Combine.

Their economy was strictly primitive, however, and since they actually occupied a very small share of the planet's total surface, the Combine Xenological Bureau had given permission for a colony, subject to the usual safeguards. These were designed to protect the natives, be it stated, and not the colony.

The Grawm, as the race styled itself, was anything but united. Primitives almost never are and the natives of Origen VII were no exception.

THE particular body of Grawm who called themselves Arghor, was a widespread confederacy of ten tribes, numbering perhaps a bit less than ten thousand warriors. As part of their hunting grounds they owned the peninsula on which the human settlement had been placed. Sparked by anti-vegetarian disgust and apparently urged on by a powerful (and hitherto unsus-

pected) shamanic priesthood, they had attacked the colony in broad daylight a month earlier. Despising humans and unaware of what advanced technology possessed in the way of weapons, the Arghor warriors had relied on head-on charges.

At tremendous cost to themselves, the "Wolves" had penetrated to the governor's quarters, destroying the subspace radio shack en route and by mere chance. When they were finally driven out, ninety-two men, twenty-two women and eleven children were dead or missing. Merely wounded in one degree or another were two hundred and ten more. An estimated thousand Arghor, all fighting males, had been killed, mostly by close-range laser fire.

Now the colony had been placed under a loose but effective siege. At first individual Arghor warriors tried to kill Templar sentries at night, for both weapons and prestige. A jury-rigged radar network had quickly put a stop to this practice. It was now safe to move around the colony perimeter, but that was all. No hunting was possible except by airboat and the boats had to land and retrieve anything killed at once. The seven existing airboats could hardly feed the eight hundred people who remained in any case, and the emergency food stocks were already half gone. The speed-growth crops on which the colony had relied for the coming season were totally destroyed, the fields stamped flat by the enraged Arghor. All in all, Powers had reflected, a fairly messy situation.

He was not unaware of the psychic damage either. Peaceful people, who hated violence, had been forced to kill and had seen loved ones killed as well. This was as much a tragedy as the purely physical aspects of what had happened.

He had interrupted the fuming governor at this point in the story and inquired what that ecclesiastic official thought ought to be done.

"Ought to be done?" spluttered Presbyter Tahira angrily. Powers decided Tahira was a standard Mark I bureaucrat—overweight, confused and helpless in an emergency.

"We should get a battleship, Marines, heavy lasers, clear this end of the peninsula," the governor had suggested, his voice rising. Other members of the council had joined in. "Paralysis beams—null rays—grabbers—rover bombs—"

The babble had slowly died away as it became apparent that Powers and Mazzechazz were simply sitting, saying nothing, waiting. Finally the room was silent again.

"NOW Reverend Presbyter," Powers had said. "I'll tell you what we're actually going to

do. You Templars, despite your religion and its training, all seem to have forgotten the Combine Charter. This is not your world, unless the intelligent inhabitants want you. This they no longer do. Whose fault your coming here was originally means nothing, understand me, nothing." He had stared coldly at the council and no eyes had met his. The Lyran had waited quietly. This was human business.

Powers then continued. "My partner and I will try to fix up this mess. Peaceably. You people can defend yourselves if attacked and that is absolutely all. I am assuming military command of this post. Does anyone oppose my authority for so doing?" Again there was silence. No one had wished to go on record as opposing Survey and Contact Field Agents. The reputation of the Corps insured that. In addition, the reminder of their religion and its teachings was not making them deeply ashamed.

Reinstalling the governor as commandant, but this time as his deputy, Powers had filed a subspace report of the situation to Prime base from the ship's radio. After ordering an emergency supply ship to leave at once and outlining his procedures and ideas as part of the report, Powers had not waited for an answer. The two S. and C. specialists had decided to head for the main Arghor encampment that very night and start the ball rolling. He and Mazzechazz had taken one of the colony's airboats and landed on the rim of the plateau about a mile from the blaze of fires marking the main Arghor camp.

Several canyons and gorges ran up from the end of the peninsula and the human settlement's location to the top of the massif. The Arghor apparently were based in a whole series of camps in the mountains and sent their warriors down to attack the offworlders in rotation.

At any rate, with less than one more Universal period left of the local, or four-day, night, Powers and Mazzechazz decided to try a sneak survey of the main enemy position. They landed, seemingly undetected. Only the cry of some distant bird thing and the hum of insects had broken the velvet darkness.

As the airboat touched down gently on the grass of the plateau a local mammoth-sized herbivore had burst, trumpeting loudly, out of an adjacent clump of brush and trampled heavily on and over the rear or engine part of the machine before galloping ponderously into the surrounding gloom. In no more than five seconds, before they had even left the airboat, the two agents had been robbed of ninety percent their mobility.

Badly shaken around and battered though they were, yet no real bodily injury had occurred. Feeling more or less safe, both

from the distance to the enemy camp and the presence of the hulking brute which had smashed their aircraft, Powers and the Lyran had started to examine the damage to the little vessel. They later agreed that one of them should have manned the combat radar, but by the time the hide lassos had dropped neatly out of the black night and over their shoulders it had been a bit late to worry about it.

Caught by an alert Arghor hunting party, which had chanced to be downwind of their landing, Terran and Lyran had been dragged before the hastily summoned Assembly of Chiefs, stripped and sentenced, all in one operation. As dawn came up they had gone down into the canyon.

II

THE two runners rounded a sharp bend in the gorge—and both abruptly halted, looking at each other as the topography sank in. This was the first sharp corner they had found since starting.

"Do you think we can do better?" hissed Mazzechazz. "We have perhaps five minutes before it comes."

"This looks quite possible," said Powers absently. In front of him were two hugh, steep-sided rocks, giant boulders over twenty feet high, which almost blocked the whole canyon. The last flash flood must have failed to move them farther down the canyon floor. A narrow gap between the rocks—only about six feet wide—constituted the sole pathway to whatever lay beyond.

Walking through this opening and pacing it, Powers estimated its depth at about ten feet and the distance to the corner they had just rounded at double that.

"This is okay," he said. "We can relax, I think, unless what's coming is a lot tougher than it has any right to be. Should be quite killable on a Terranorm planet though."

"It comes now," said the Lyran and proceeded to crouch low at the downcanyon base of one of the great stones, the one to the right. His tail was coiled neatly about his ankles and his great eyes were covered by his long-fingered hands.

The man stepped out into the middle of the gap and waited. He finished very carefully removing the large stone, an oval green Cadmean fire eye, from the ring on his right third finger. As he looked upcanyon he hefted the stone in his right hand, keeping his thumb and index finger pressed on it. He could hear the rustling himself now—it was rapidly becoming louder and louder.

Powers poised for action.

Around the corner of the cliff appeared two immense whiplike antenna, a sickly blue in color. They

were followed by a great, flat head surmounted by two monstrous pupilless eyes, also blue. From mighty mandibles at the front of the head drooled a foul-scented ichor as the creature paused to examine the puny-looking prey, which seemed to await it with such confidence. Six great, jointed legs, tipped with spiked claws, and then an armored, ten-foot body slowly followed the awful head around the corner. Powers and the beast were now no more than fifteen feet apart.

"Down!" shouted the Terran and hurled the three-quarter inch stone square, flat and low, at the nightmare head. Even as he released the tiny trigger pressed down underneath the stone, he was diving to the left for the shelter of the other great rock. He fell prone—face ground into the sand—behind it as the tiny Osmium wrecker bomb went into its nuclear cycle, exactly on target. The huge boulder actually shifted in its bed next to him and a blast of superheated air came over its top and around the sides. Powers, his eyes tightly shut, hugged the sand as the terrific heat of the almost soundless explosion eddied around his body and the sand swirled over his naked back and shoulders. His eardrums ached from the pressure of the blast.

"Get up, Bill," said Mazzechazz. "It worked."

POWERS scrambled to his feet, somewhat embarrassed by the fact that he had not yet realized it was safe to do so. He found the big Lyran standing in the gap between the two mammoth stones. The sand on which his clawed feet rested was now covered by a thin film of fused, black glass, a mute tribute to the tiny bomb's intense heat.

The two looked back up canyon but except for a scorched area, fifty feet across, where sand and rock had flowed together, there was nothing to be seen.

"Superscorp seems to have bought it," acknowledged Powers. There was not a speck of matter to show that the giant arthropod had ever existed, so savage had been the instant furnace created by the nuclear Osmium.

"That's the second time that ring has saved my life," said Powers, turning away. "Give me a swallow of the water and let's go. If my bearings are right, we should make the base camp in three more hours, provided the Wolves don't pick us off first."

"They probably have the camp ringed by scouts," said Mazzechazz, passing over the canteen. "We know how good they are. Why not signal, use smoke or something and call down one of the three big airboats they have left?"

"The Arghor could reach us a lot quicker, I suspect."

They both glanced up at the rims of the gorge, far above against the white sky, but no sign of life or movement could be seen there. Some winged creatures circled higher still, probably the local analog of vultures. The oppressive heat of Origen, the great, blue sun, still lay all around them.

The man drank some lukewarm water and considered, while the Lyran waited. Of the two, Mazzechazz was the profounder thinker, the philosopher-logician, the chess player. He was also the memory bank, a living library of history and technology, spanning many races and worlds besides his own. But in a situation calling for lightning action, reflex moves and brutal cunning *Homo sapiens* had still not met a peer in the galaxy. Powers was the decision maker here by mutual consent. Just as he had cold-bloodedly risked annihilation for years by wearing a long-outlawed nuke ringstone, so he now ran the combat situation on a moment-to-moment basis.

In this case his decision stayed fixed. "We have a better chance trying it on foot," he decided aloud. "They won't be expecting us and I'm pretty sure the whole tribe back at the main camp thinks we're dead. We got caught good when the airboat was stomped—but I'm damned if I think any primitive can beat us at scouting when we really work at it."

Without another word they set off down the canyon again. They now possessed no weapon at all, save for their wits, but the prospect of meeting another ravening life form daunted neither of them. They were trained to do all they could and not worry about what could not be helped. Worrying, as opposed to forethought, clouded the mind. A clouded mind could mean bad reaction time and that got you killed. So, at a trot calculated to save energy, the two agents loped along, looking for the next obstacle.

TEN Universal hours later Powers was as tired as he had ever been in his sometimes very active life. He and his partner were uncomfortably ensconced in a giant tree, about a half-mile from the fortified outer zone of the Templar settlement. To all appearances, as far as their getting to home base safely went, they might as well have been on the other side of the planet.

They had emerged earlier from the mouth of the canyon to find themselves in more or less dense forest, although moving in the right direction for ultimate safety. Realizing that they probably stood a good chance of being slaughtered on the ground by native predators, if not by the Arghor, they had taken to the towering trees and moved more or less easily along through them toward the base. Their alien order prob-

ably helped keep what animals they saw at a distance.

But now, out of water and hungry, they seemed stuck and could see no way to go farther. Arghor sentries, easily spotted from high above, were spread all around the section of base perimeter the two could observe. The offworld agents had managed to count nine of them, in a layer three deep, crouched in immobile watchfulness. The warriors were not too close to one another laterally; that is, each file of three formed a rather isolated line extending out from the base to the forest's edge, each of the enemy being about one hundred and fifty feet apart. With the wolf people's keen scent and hearing the formation appeared an effective one. It was hard to see how man and Lyran could get by without detection.

"Suppose we went between two of the files?" said Powers in a whisper.

"Then both sets would hear or smell us," said Mazzechazz. "But I have an idea. These are very proud, independent creatures, William. They dislike calling for help unless desperate. Many savages act so. Now suppose we come down, you in front and then—"

Powers' answering whisper grew excited.

An hour later they were hailing the Templar sentries manning the perimeter. And ten minutes after that they were relaxing in air-conditioned privacy on their own ship.

"I'm amazed that anything that obvious worked," mumbled Powers as he chewed away at the second large steak he had cooked. Across the dining table, Mazzechazz was eating spiced, processed fruit. His people had never been carnivores, or at least not since a stage analogous to a shrew in human evolution.

He finished a portion of something purple and juicy and flicked a handful of seeds out of his mouth with his slender tongue before answering.

"Psychology, William, psychology. Action is not everything. What could be simpler? You walk up to a sentry, naked, unarmed and hands in the air. By the way, there is food for thought in this area of defenselessness. I must consider it.

"To resume, can he kill you? No, you are helpless, he has to talk, figure things out, try to understand why you are out there coming from the wrong direction. This is too much of a puzzle. In the half-minute it takes to think of asking for advice, not help mind you, advice, I, the quieter moving of the two, have eased up behind him and throttled him into insensibility. The sentries in the files to left and right have heard nothing and the two remaining in his own line but nearer to camp have not

been called. He gets tied up, I take his knife for insurance and we repeat the performance twice more, all the way into camp. Psychology!" He selected a package of Terran figs and carefully opened it, transparent nictitating membranes snapping over his eyes in anticipation. For a while the two ate in silence.

At last, his belt groaning, Powers leaned back and reached for a pipe.

"So now what? We managed to get out safe and sound, but that's all. Got any ideas?

"It seems to me," he went on, without waiting for the other to speak, "that we have to recommend evacuation. The Arghor are intelligent, quite highly intelligent, even if they've only arrived at the Neolithic. They now detest humans and want to kill them all. It's their planet and they have the right to do so if the humans remain. The humans, under Syrian Combine law, do *not* have the right to kill the Arghor, even in self defense, once they, the humans that is, have been officially told to leave and the Combine has evaluated the situation and agreed. Which would seem to make evacuation the only possibility. Someone is going to get a very noisy kick in the pants over this," he added. "I mean the S. and C. team that recommended this hell hole for colonization. And that's our service responsibility. The whole of Survey and Contact is going to look awfully incompetent when this news gets out. Even the Bureau can't keep this one quiet. There are too many people and departments involved, Xenological, Colonization—all those, etcetra." He subsided, stoking his pipe with black *Cannicotea antarea*, lighting it and emitting clouds of lavender smoke.

THE Lyran ran his tongue around his wide, lipless mouth, pushed the empty food containers away and leaned back in his hammock, supple tail curling neatly around the stanchion which supported one end of it.

"Don't be so gloomy, William," he said gently. "We have only been here a little over one cycle. Besides, if my ideas are correct, there should be no real trouble about this colony. A little thought is what is needed, a little philosophy, a little history, and a little psychology. Something workable exists in our common store of experience for every eventuality. We have only to tap the proper circuit."

"Have you got something to use all that quickly?" said Powers. "Short of driving the Arghor out of an area and erecting a large force field, I can't think of anything."

"There are several possibilities," said the Lyran. "They are perhaps eighty percent carniv-

orous, or even more, from the recorded data. We could quite easily remove most of the game animals from any given area, perhaps drive the animals out with contact sonics. The Arghor would also have to move or starve."

"That's interference with a native intelligent life form. Destroying or moving their food supply is hardly noninterference, is it?"

"All right," rejoined Mazzechazz. "But it's not lethal and surely allowable."

"Not, and I stress this point," said Powers smugly, "unless the people or civilization or culture or what have you *constitute a menace to the peace of the civilized universum*. From "constitute" on, that's a quote from our own manual, which you know better than I do." He leaned back and exhaled more of the pungent smoke. Since Lyrans have no powers of scent worth mentioning, Mazzechazz had never noticed the aroma of Powers' pipe, which made many other beings as well as humans ill.

"Mmm, quite so, William. But I never really intended this proposal seriously. I simply wished to indicate that there are any number of solutions to any given problem and that we should be exploring them and not trying to evade our duty. We need to reason matters through, not simply report that matters are hopeless."

Powers tried to look thoughtful. All that came to his mind was a desire to rest, which was not very helpful. The Lyran, however, had a modest share of the strange telepathic talent of his race.

"Go lie down," he said. "I don't feel tired. When you wake up I'll give you a dozen solutions, all good. Then you can explain why none of them will work. Yet one of them will be correct. The clue I will leave you to dream over is this: the answer lies in ancient Terra, in your own past."

THE following day, local time*, was busy indeed. Once persuaded that the weird proposal made by Mazzechazz was quite legitimate and even practical, Powers had to sell it to the governor and council of the Templars. He knew that if these men, particularly the Presbyter-governor, could be convinced, the rest of the colony would follow. The debate was long.

"Presbyter, I am not a member of your splendid religion," he said, trying a new argument, "but isn't there a saying 'Oh, Ye of little faith—' in your holy book?"

"Yes, there is," said Tahira

* Four Universal 28-hour (Terran) periods equal one Origen VII day or night. In the human colony Universal Time based on this cycle was maintained artificially, since the days and nights were simply too long for human activities. The Grawm were largely diurnal but not entirely so.

sourly. "However, you are offering an explanation based on science not religion. And if you are wrong we will all perish miserably, women and children as well."

"All the Research and Biological authorities we have messaged on Prime Base bear my partner out," countered Powers. "They also say that if the plan is not tried the only alternative is to recommend immediate evacuation. The colony will be completely written off and the planet will become an educatable ward of the Syrian Combine. Perhaps it will be opened to colonization again by some more reasonable, adaptable group." Always save the sting for the tail, the psych books said.

"Further," he continued, "your remark about all perishing is silly. There is some danger to a few of us—those out in front—I agree. I will be out there in front, you know, with whoever volunteers from your colony. The extrapolation based on BuPsych readings says about twenty men should be enough. No women or kids need be involved at all."

"Suppose they use missile weapons, spears maybe, from a distance?" said a younger council member; one of the smarter ones, Powers recalled.

"They'll be barred from doing so for two reasons," said Powers. "One, we'll be away out in a part of your fields near no cover when they spot us. Two, they kill hand-to-hand from preference. We'll be isolated, almost naked and empty-handed when they first see us working. The results will surprise you, I guarantee.

"Look," he went on, "Sakh and I dug up one of the dead Arghor you buried and dissected him right down to his capillaries. These are pure and simple pack carnivores, only a lot more intelligent than the four-footed variety you and I are used to. In fact, let's face it, in lots of ways, as intelligent as you or I. No species precisely like them has been encountered up to this point, but they obviously had to appear at some point just because of the law of averages. And as Sakh points out, they're a picture-book example of what had been predicted they would be like if they ever did appear. "They live in tribes, which are little more than extended families or clans, rather like Terran primitives.

"The Amerindians of old Noramerica," said a hitherto silent councilor.

"Exactly," said Powers, glad of any support, however vague and qualified. "To go on, they possess a high degree of what used to be called chivalry. They never harm the females, the aged and the young in their battles with each other. War is a sport for healthy males only. Again, there are numerous Terran parallels."

"AGENT POWERS, assuming that what you have said earlier is correct, this last obviously is totally wrong," sneered the Presbyter. "They killed every child and woman they could reach in the battle. A number are just plain missing and you have admitted that they were probably carried off to be eaten. Is this an example of your so-called chivalry?"

Patiently Powers returned to the scientific explanation he had presented earlier in the day.

"There again are two points to take note of, Presbyter, One, what were women and children doing during the attack? Two, what is the Arghor view of human beings, inculcated by both your food habits and by the arguments of their priests, wizards or whatever you want to call them?

"Don't answer," he went on. "I know what happened and so do you. When attacked by hairy, savage monsters the women and kids fought. Who wouldn't?" I agree entirely. But if they had known more, if they had been trained, they would not have fought at all. All they had to do was what I've told you. "Sakh and I took an Arghor prisoner some twelve standard hours ago and we went through his mind up, down and sideways. We *know* the Arghor, I tell you, and Sakh's idea is pure genius—which is nothing more than intuition, memory and scientific knowledge all coalesced. You *have* to try this or go home with your tails between your legs, beaten by a bunch of primitives and savages."

The Templar councilors stared at one another for a few seconds without speaking. Powers leaned back in his chair, projecting a good imitation of casualness and tried not to look at the silent Lyran across the table. He, in turn, had no trouble appearing calm. A reptilian face seldom displays emotion in any way a human can read.

Powers was aware that his last shot had been fired. And he had managed to conceal a major source of his concern from the council—the fact that Survey and Contact would get a public black eye if the colony were forced to leave. This was something to avoid at all costs. Now he could do nothing but wait. But in truth, the decision had already been made. The Presbyter-governor broke the silence.

"It means only risking twenty men, I suppose, and we have lost many more. We need eighteen volunteers, gentlemen."

"You mean twenty, don't you, Reverend, sir?" said a council member.

"Agent Powers and I make two," said the governor drily. He met Powers' eyes squarely for the first time and even managed the ghost of a smile.

Powers said, "I'm honored."

The details were easily settled. The long local night was coming to an end. The idea would be tested at dawn by Powers and the others. Mazzechazz would remain in command of the perimeter, most of which would be unguarded. Save for the party of exposed men who had volunteered; there should be no real danger to the rest of the humans on the planet. And in last analysis, the *Farover* possessed enough armament to stand off with ease anything the whole Arghor confederacy could summon up. But it was not supposed to come to that. There was going to be no violence at all, Powers told himself silently as the meeting broke up—not the slightest bit of violence.

III

PRETENDING to hoe a chewed-up, rock-strewn piece of what had once been a Templar grain field in the pitch dark just before dawn, Powers was not quite so sure.

He and Governor Tahira, plus eighteen other nervous men had shipped out in the colony's airboats a half-hour earlier. They had been dumped, almost naked and armed only with wooden sticks, in the middle of what had been the Templar's agricultural area, over a mile from the nearest woods. They were all pretending to hoe.

Powers concentrated on mental calisthenics and recited twelve Vegan verse palindromes backward, chopping savagely at the ground as he did so. He could hear nothing and see very little but he felt sure that he and the others had been accurately pinpointed by the Wolves.

Quit calling them that, he thought, *You're getting to believe Mazzechazz too much and too hard . . .*

And where was that reptilian conman? Why, back on the ship, since he would be useless in this human problem and would merely confuse the issue for the Arghor minds.

Artificially preoccupied with such reflections, Powers was taken by surprise by the coming of the dawn. Almost without warning visibility became unlimited. As the rim of the giant sun poked above the horizon he lowered his gaze and squinted. Unconsciously, he and the other men began to draw slowly together, their eyes shuttling to the dark forest.

"There they come—" A young settler, pale but determined, stopped pretending to hoe and pointed. Shading his eyes, Powers saw the line of black dots break out of the forest and move rapidly toward them.

"Remember," he shouted, "they can kill us in seconds if you don't obey orders and do what you've been taught. Have faith!"

"As a priest myself, Agent, in a case like this, perhaps I should be above fear." Presbyter Tahira had moved close to Powers and spoken in a low tone of voice but his eyes twinkled and he seemed quite calm.

The Arghor were now only a hundred yards away, and suddenly the blazing dawn's quiet was shattered by a concerted howl.

The warrior nearest to Powers was now charging, heavy, stone-tipped spear drawn back in one hairy arm. Others who had outstripped their fellows were about to fall upon Tahira and his eighteen Templars.

"Now!" shouted Powers.

INSTANTLY everyone, including Powers himself, dropped to the ground. The men lay flat on their backs, knees drawn up to protect their stomachs, backs arched and arms extended at full length on the ground. All bent their heads back, so that their straining throats were exposed to the sky above. In this posture, eyes wide open, they waited for the enemy.

By rolling his eyes, Powers could see the six-foot, black-furred warrior who had been about to skewer him stop a few yards away, dumbfounded, fanged jaws agape. Unmoving, Powers watched the Arghor approach, spear drooping, until he stood over Powers' body, his rank odor a pungent reminder of alienness.

"What is this skyfolk madness?" the Arghor growled. "Get up and fight, die like a warrior, skyman?"

Powers remained frozen in his strange posture. The Arghor raised his spear as if to strike and suddenly shrieked horribly. Somehow Powers managed not to flinch. The Arghor stopped screaming. Staring at Powers, he yelped with frustration, shaking his hairy head from side to side and doing a little dance of sheer rage.

"Get up and die," he howled again, dancing in a circle. Powers could hear a similar and deafening chorus all around him. It was music to his numbed ears. He allowed himself a small smile. His neck muscles ached from the upward jut of his throat and chin but he could hold the cramped posture a long time if he had to do so. So, he was sure, could the others. Now that they realized it was actually working, they could hold it all day, spurred on by success.

His own screaming Arghor suddenly stood squarely over his body, furry legs straddling Powers. Growling horribly and wordlessly, the savage fumbled with his leather breechclout.

By God, Sakh even predicted this . . .

Powers then closed his eyes tightly. The ultimate insult and also the ultimate award for success. The prize for cunning was hardly pleasant but it was a far cry from death or defeat. He

waited, honest laughter exploding deep in his body, but outwardly as rigid as ever, for the final and irrevocable gesture of contempt.

AS THE *Farover* bored through its first subspace jump on its return trip to Sirius Prime the two agents relaxed, each in his own way. The ship was on automatic and its computer could take care of almost any emergency imaginable.

Stripped of his harness, Sakh Mazzechazz was going over his body inch by inch with a tiny battery-operated buffer, polishing his minute scales until his whole yellowish green body gleamed and shimmered in the light.

"You must have a date," said Powers.

Equally relaxed, he had been transcribing notes for his own private records. Now he put down his recorder and turned his gaze on the Lyran.

"I said, you must have a date. Am I right?"

"A young female from my delegation's staff on Prime Base has brought me messages from the nearer members of my clan. It is only natural that I hear them in the proper atmosphere of privacy. Otherwise proper reverence would not be displayed."

"Yes," agreed Powers. "You mean you have a date."

"That's right," said the Lyran. His red goggle eyes met Powers' and the transparent membrane flickered up and down rapidly in an uproarious laugh.

Powers smiled. "You deserve a date," he said quietly. "As a matter of fact, you deserve a medal. Not that you'll ever get one, pal. Mind telling me the background of your wizardry back there on Wolf World? You said the clues that gave you the idea were from my own racial history, I know, but we had no time to go into it in any detail."

"A small matter, Williams, hardly worth discussion. It will be in the report and you can read it later back at H.Q."

"Ah, ah," said Powers. "Play fair, Lizard face, I know how modest you pretend to be but this time don't bother. I want a story. Let the backroom boys read it at H.Q. You just tell Daddy in simple language."

The Lyran's gular pouch suddenly swelled out into a great, bluish fan under the long, thin jaws. The sight was a frightening one to someone unaccustomed to his race. The gesture meant absolutely nothing, as a matter of fact, being purely vestigial and used perhaps as a yawn or stretch in a human.

"Very well," said Mazzechazz, "since you are so insistent. But it hardly bears telling. When the human governor, the priest Tahira, spoke of the Arghor as

'wolves,' something clicked in my mind. Somewhere, long ago, I had seen a reference, perhaps far back in time, as a young student. It was to the Terran carnivorous animals called by this name. The reference, too, must have lain in some sphere of my own interest, which, as you know, mainly comprises alien psychology and things related to it.

"The Lyran mind, organized as it is, must reject useless information and store usable data only. This reference then must lie in the latter category. I therefore put myself in a trance state while you listened to the history and the hysterics of the governor and his council, and isolated the reference, as well as several related to it—and others still more remote but bearing on the general subject. The matter of recall under such conditions requires training, of course. But it was not so hard as the time I—"

"Never mind past triumphs," growled Powers. "Stick to Wolf World."

"If you insist, Softskin. Your own education may even be raised an infinitesimal notch. Unliklier things have happened." He neatly ducked a seat cushion and went on talking. "Long, long ago on Terra, before your first Global Interregnum, the science of behavioral psychology, which even I must admit, you excel in, was still in its infancy. Certain of your early scientists, led by a man named Lorenz, postulated that rules of behavior which rigidly governed the lower animals also might affect human beings. The fact that Lorenz and the others had barely begun even to discover the basic rules which governed the lower animals made their work very difficult.

"But they persevered. One of them, whose name I never memorized, having no reason to, was working with *Canis lupus*, the wolf, the ancestor of all the dogs and doglike things you humans carry about with you to this day as pets and guardians. This person discovered that a pack-living carnivore such as the wolf is the most rule-bound, other-structured animal in creation. It has to be. If it were not, the race it represents would perish. The rules are simple but unbreakable and they go as follows:

1) Females and young of its race may not be attacked unless the young are approaching maturity. Then the adult pack leaders may expel them.

2) Territories are inviolate and may not be entered without elaborate ceremonial and ritual between packs.

3) Any members of the same species, that is, a wolf which exposes its vital organs, such as the throat and belly, and refuses to fight may not be harmed.

"The last rule is perhaps the

strongest of all. Note, William, that these rules are common sense for a *carnivorous* animal. Omnivores and herbivores, such as you and I, can kill our own species with ease. In the case of my planet, a world government came mercifully early, you know the unhappy and bloody history of your own before the Syrian Combine discovered Terra and compelled you to seek membership.

"But a true carnivore can only kill on a very small scale. Any male Grawm would have to have a civilization a billion Standard revolutions old to overcome the inbred inhibitions against total war upon his own species. Fighting other males for sexual reasons, small-scale raids for prestige, for sport really, all these things, yes. But killing the young, the aged, the females and above all those who will not fight back, never! He can't do it. The pack leader can kill any pack member. This is because he is the strongest and the wisest, the most cunning in battle. Those below him do not fight back when he punishes. It would be interesting to know what happens to old leaders! I think I can guess, however.

"Once I had recalled all this I examined, mentally and physically, a Grawm male. It then became a simple matter to set up a construct and a field problem. And of course it worked, because my examination proved my theoretical postulate to be more than approximate. It was more exact than I could believe."

"Irritating though it is to agree with you, I'm afraid you're right," said Powers.

"You were so right," he went on, "that when that hairy buck standing over me relieved himself I almost wanted to yell, 'Not me, Mazzechazz did it!' You told me that this was a probable gesture of utter contempt among such a species and it certainly was."

"The extrapolation for such an action was only sixty-five percent, allowing for the differences in intelligence and culture between Grawm as a higher species, and wolves," said the Lyran. "I was lucky."

"I wasn't." Powers grinned. "But even that kind of bath wasn't much of a price, I agree, not for what we got. Once they realized that the twenty males they had pinned down wouldn't move, wouldn't fight, they sent for the big chiefs. It took quite a while but there was no real problem. I simply made it plain that we were non-fighters. That all the fighters had been killed in the big raid and that we would never send any more. That we were cowering behind the colony walls trying to think of a way to tell them this.

"They were almost physically ill when I finished. In a generation, maybe, the Propaganda boys can start a little work of an underhand kind and begin to

civilize them. Meanwhile, they want no part of any human.

"Now," he went on, stretching lazily, "we can forget about the Arghor Confederacy—or any Grawm as a problem. Every colonist will be taught as an infant to flop on his or her back, throat exposed, the minute a male Grawm appears. I strongly suspect that all the Arghor villages will change location to miles away from the settlement—and very quickly at that. The sense of disgust, the sheer revulsion, at being located near a colony of non-fighting males must be hideously strong.

"I am incapable of truly appreciating—or should I say feeling mammalian emotion, as you know," said Mazzechazz. "I would not have risked this operation without your approval despite all my theory."

"The minute you suggested it I knew it would work," said Powers. "These Arghor aren't so very far from my own ancestors in a lot of ways. The main problem, of course, the real risk, was a rather subtle one. Did the Grawm species, specifically the Arghor, despite their hatred and contempt for us, feel we were their spiritual equals? If they didn't, if they saw us a weird but lower form of animal, then all bets were off. Things could have been different. The wolf inhibition against killing only applies to one's own kind, not to rabbits or deer. That was the only real chance we had to take. Your figures said it was an extremely good chance, so I took it and persuaded the others to take it as well."

"Actually," the Lyran began, "actually you took no chance at all." He appeared in some impossible way, embarrassed at what he was saying. Finally, after looking at a bulkhead, he stared his partner in the eye, using one of his own periscope orbs, head turned sideways.

"I had a needle-beam laser on electronic reflex aimed at your particular assailant, William. Had he moved one wrong muscle and I know to a millimeter which they are—the telltales, I mean—he would have died at once. So would the others."

Powers was horrified. "My god, that would have violated the major Prime Directive! Are you crazy? How would you have explained it later?"

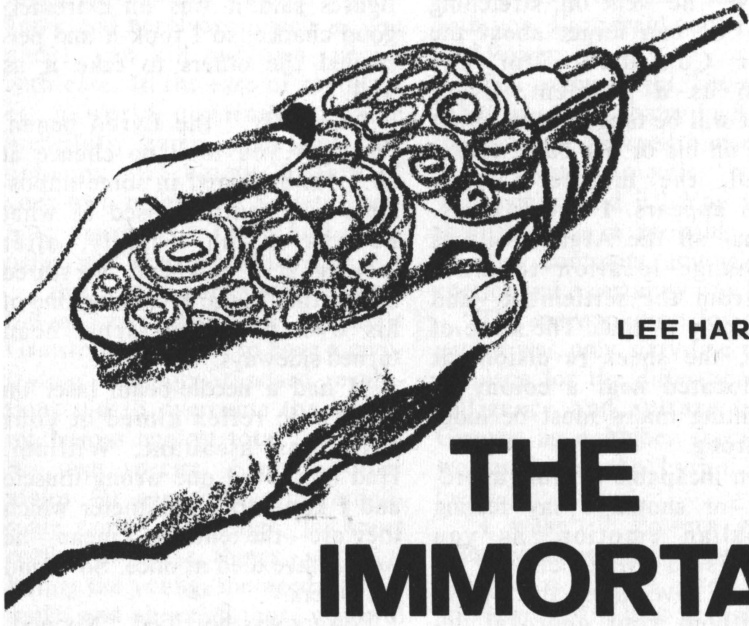
The Lyran's membranes flickered up and down over the great red eyes.

"Oh," he said. "I would have thought of something. I am too lazy and too conservative to become accustomed to a new partner, you see. It has nothing, of course, to do with sentiment."

Powers looked hard at the Lyran and then himself glanced away at a sealed port.

"Yes," he said. "I see." ●

Science had deprived him of death . . .



LEE HARDING

THE IMMORTAL

THE house had been empty for several days. The skeleton staff had been dismissed well in advance of his arrival and all incoming business calls had been transferred elsewhere to be handled by underlings. Darius Wynter did not wish to be disturbed.

His private retreat was so artfully concealed that it seemed from a distance to form part of the rocky headland jutting out of the lugubrious northern coastline. A solitary window in his study overlooked the gray and restless sea. The glass had been treated to eliminate glare and to prevent reflected sunlight from advertising his location.

He sat at his desk with his back to the window, a distinguished-looking man accustomed to supporting his considerable share of his time's problems upon his broad shoulders. Serenity was a familiar companion to him but from time to time deep shadows of doubt crossed his mind. His gray eyes were locked into some inner vision.

He sat motionless for some time, conscious of the mournful sound of the distant surf raging against the jagged rocks at the foot of the headland, while his practiced intellect inspected the facets of his problem. Eventually he reached a decision. He reached into an open drawer on his right, withdrew a number of documents and placed them carefully in front of him. He hesitated. Then his hand, guided by familiar reflexes, groped deeper into the drawer and emerged with an ornate handgun.

The workmanship of the weapon was remarkable. It was one of the last remaining examples of late twentieth century craftsmanship in the realm of portable lasers. The intricate hand-tooling had always delighted the connoisseur in Darius Wynter. Guns fascinated him and his collection of antique hand weapons was perhaps the finest in the known universe. This particular item was his favorite.

He handled it fondly. His long white fingers traced the tactile sensuousness of the intricate patterns of filigree and brought a smile of satisfaction to his weary face. His right hand closed affectionately around the polished jade butt and his finger curled over the firing button.

The weapon seemed to come to life under his touch. A warmth spread through his fingers that was like shaking hands with a friend. Yet he knew that this was an illusion, that the warmth, the contentment, came from within himself and were transferred into the beautiful instrument of death.

He smiled again. The gun felt comfortable in his hand, as though it had grown there in answer to some need. He lowered his hand until his knuckles touched the cold top of the desk. His mind toyed idly with possibilities. With the beam adjusted to "fine" the gun, when fired, would incinerate an area roughly two feet in circumference—large enough to burn a man's head into ashes and remove him from all worldly cares—and quickly enough for him never to know what had happened.

His fingers moved, playing with the corrugated adjustment dial on the bridge of the weapon. His eyes had acquired a cool, dispassionate air. He shifted his grip so that the narrow muzzle faced him and his thumb was poised over the small white firing button.

A ghost of a smile clung to his bloodless lips. There was always time for one last thought—behind him he could hear the patient surge of the restless ocean and felt a brief moment of pity for its senseless striving.

His left index finger flipped over the safety catch on the ornate handgun.

He looked indifferently into the small black eye of death.

And pressed the firing button.

NOTHING happened.

But time reeled to a stop. Before the last gram of pressure had been applied to the shiny white button under his thumb his hand froze. A sudden stasis grabbed at his body and made it rigid. His blind eyes stared wildly ahead at nothing in particular. Only his thoughts remained active and they tumbled around in his head in no reasonable order; for the time being he had lost the ability to think sequentially.

A moment later his Follower materialized in front of him.

The Follower was a young man dressed in powder-blue coveralls who had the flat, unimaginative features of a public servant. He stepped casually from the travel portal and moved over to the desk. Behind him the glowing golden nimbus of the portal dimmed but remained in position, ready to transport this servant of the rich back to his observation post once this small crisis had been ironed out.

Around his waist was a wide steel belt studded with an array of switches. He carried a small black box, which he deposited on the carpet in the center of the room. Then he walked over, leaned across the desk and carefully pried the handgun out of Darius Wynter's hand. He relocked the safety catch and placed the weapon to one side with a bored, indifferent expression.

He stood back and unclipped a small, cylindrical instrument from his waist and waved it slowly around the room. He consulted a small dial fixed to one end and nodded, satisfied. He kneeled and pressed several switches on the small black box on the floor. A faint vibration shook the room and blurred the outlines of the furniture and two men inside it—the effect lasted for several seconds before the room returned to normal.

Darius Wynter blinked. His lungs relaxed and expelled the air they had held since his seizure. His eyes focused first on his empty hands and then on his visitor.

"Oh," he said. "So it's you."

He had failed again.

Giving the impression of a man suddenly too weary, he leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. The tips of his fingers dug into his forehead and then worked slowly down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean—"

"That's all right," the young man said quickly. He was required to appear solicitous, but his conditioned and supposedly cheery smile had a facile look. "We've been watching you for days."

Wynter looked genuinely surprised. "So long?"

The young man tapped the end

of the cylindrical instrument in his gloved left hand. "You've been giving off quite a high potential for some time. We knew you'd try something eventually."

"But I had no idea—"

"Until a few moments ago, when you picked up the gun?"

Darius nodded.

The young man's smug expression became suddenly grave. "I think it only fair to caution you that I'm still getting a rather high probability indication." He raised his instrument significantly. "Of course it sometimes takes time for these things to die down. Personally, I would advise you to try and grab hold of yourself as quickly as possible."

Darius Wynter managed a convincing shudder. With some effort he pulled himself together. "If you don't mind," he said, rising from his desk, "I'll pour myself a drink."

"Go ahead, Mr. Wynter. You probably need one."

Darius waved open his wall cabinet and poured himself a good strong whisky with surprisingly steady hands. He turned around.

"Could I offer you something?"

The young man shook his head. "Sorry, Mr. Wynter, but you see we have rules against—"

"Yes—yes of course. I understand. How stupid of me." He brought the elegant crystal decanter back with him and set it down on the wide desk. His eyes skipped quickly past the beautiful little handgun the Follower had left there. He managed to look both guilty and embarrassed at the same time.

"You've had a go at this before, haven't you?" the young man observed.

DARIUS shrugged. "If you've been watching me for as long as you say you have you'll have familiarized yourself with my file."

"That I have, sir. You've made seven previous attempts to take your life, most of them rather clumsy and well telegraphed, I'm glad to say."

"Yes," Darius agreed, a trifle wistfully, "there was always a Follower handy."

"Well, that's what you pay your premiums for, isn't it?" The young man made no effort to conceal his contempt.

Darius declined to comment. Instead he resumed his seat in the well-upholstered desk chair and looked thoughtfully around the room.

"I had no idea this room was bugged."

The young man smiled smugly. "I suppose you thought that your insurers wouldn't have heard about this place, that you would be able to sneak away up here without anybody's knowing? But what use is a comprehensive coverage if you can cheat like that?

Trudential is, Mr. Wynter, the most experienced insurer in the business: we never leave anything to chance. We're thorough, Mr. Wynter, and that's why we have the best record in the business." He moved his portable meter around while he spoke; he was still getting a faint threshold signal and this made him wary.

His careless arrogrance annoyed Darius. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven," the Follower replied guardedly. "Why do you ask?"

Darius shrugged and sipped his drink. "The impetuousness of youth interests me. Do you like your job?"

The young man made a vague sort of gesture which might be taken to mean yes.

"I see. Well. I suppose you would have to, wouldn't you? And I suppose you're chasing a little slice of immortality along with the rest of us?"

The word was a joke. Rejuvenation was a costly and unpredictable business, difficult to discipline. Some recipients had barely managed to scrape through another hundred years, while others had endured the entire span of two and a quarter centuries since the introduction of the anti-agathics. Everything depended on the individual metabolism and how it reacted to the drugs. The techniques improved every year and the ultimate goal was a golden, predictable longevity for every person in the known universe—according to his means.

And there lay the rub. Sometimes, when his lonely mind was wrapped in cynicism, Darius found it amusing that, in this age of material abundance, the accumulation of worthless baubles and artifacts had given way to a universal scratching for another few years of life and, as always, the prize went to the richest.

The young man didn't answer, but this didn't worry Darius—his words had been an observation, not a direct question. He saw a flicker of greed appear self-consciously in the Follower's cold blue eyes, but it was soon erased by a look of professional aloofness.

"How long have you been a Follower?" Darius asked.

"This is my first year." But he answered off-handedly. His eyes were intent upon his meter and he seemed disturbed. He looked up. "Mr. Wynter, I must mention again that I am still getting a rather high probability index on your emotional register."

Darius' tolerant face framed an understanding smile. "I wouldn't worry about that. I mean, if I'm still determined to kill myself, then the observation circuits which your people have so cunningly concealed in this room will very soon throw me into stasis. Isn't that correct?"

The young man nodded, but did not seem able to shake his uneasiness. Preventing people like Darius Wynter from taking their life was one thing—the emotional registers built into the house monitored the degree of the subject's depression and were always ready to forestall any self-destructive act—but it was also his sworn duty to safe-guard the mental health of his client. "I urge you to relax, Mr. Wynter. I will summon a therapist and—"

Darius waved a deprecating hand. "That won't be necessary. I assure you; I have never felt better in my life. And I do wish you'd stop fiddling with that thing. It's probably registering something left over from a few moments ago. Strange, but it already seems ages ago. You shouldn't worry about my making another attempt—after all, ninety-nine percent of all suicide attempts are decisions of the moment, are they not? And once that particular moment is past the mind has a chance to reconsider its motives." He smiled and picked up the ornate little handgun and held it fondly.

The young man tensed.

"Don't worry," Darius laughed. "As you very well know, the moment I turn this beautiful little weapon against myself—or make any other move that threatens my existence—the circuits will apply stasis. But note—as long as I keep it pointed away from myself they do not react." The gun was now pointing in the general direction of the Follower. "Take a quick peek at your meter," Darius directed. "Is it still registering strong depression, suggesting suicidal tendencies?"

THE young man shook his head. He was conscious of the deadly weapon pointing vaguely in his direction and puzzled by the contradictions provided by his meter. He was getting a reading that vacillated between minor depression and sudden elation—the latter, he knew from experience and training, was the feeling of relief that enveloped the subject when he realized that his life had been saved and his ridiculous act subverted.

"So why don't you relax?" Darius suggested. Mischievous humor danced across his face. "There's nothing to worry about. And I'm rather enjoying your company at the moment. Tell me; haven't you ever wondered why there's such a high incidence of attempted suicide among the immortals?" This was the name that had somehow become attached, albeit romantically, to the world's leading industrialists, politicians and artists and all those who had managed to survive, like Darius Wynter, longer than anybody else because they were wealthy enough to maintain their

rejuvenation treatments for more that two hundred years.

The young man said nothing, only stared at him with a mixture of puzzlement and uneasiness.

"But surely," Darius went on, "you must have wondered, at some time or another why we, who have lived for so long and enjoyed every boon life knows, should suddenly want to end it. And try over and over again. Doesn't the duality puzzle you—that we court our own deaths unpredictably and at the same time take out this costly insurance to guard against dying? If 'immortality' is worth so much wealth and effort, why do we seek to abuse it when we have it?" His face softened. Some of the humor drained from his eyes and he studied the little weapon in his hands thoughtfully, his fingers caressing the delicate filigree.

"It isn't boredom, you know. That's the popular misconception. God knows there's enough I haven't done to keep me occupied for quite a few centuries yet. Absolute wealth requires absolute management—I haven't nearly as much time to myself as I would like. Yet to live forever I must manufacture wealth to make this possible—you follow?"

A flicker of interest showed in the young man's eyes—and a little confusion as well. Darius pressed on, warming to his topic.

"So it isn't boredom. Rather, it's a basic conflict within ourselves. It's been there since man first became intelligent and adapted to his world—and it's been cruelly accentuated by the boon of longevity. From the moment we recognized the existence of time we have walked hand in hand with futility—the anti-agathics have also given us more time to consider the dim worthlessness of achievement. But that is only the consideration of our intellect—the animal part of us will cling tenaciously to life for want of a suitable substitute. The intellect cries out that all activity is dross, that nothing lasts forever, that even the weariest river flows somewhere to sea; but the primitive, unthinking part of us demands that we endure.

"That is the struggle—to endure. And in the past most of us have. It is the prospect of immortality that makes life so dull for us—and sometimes the intellect wins and takes it upon itself to end the dreadful duality. At such moments we try to take our lives—but the animal in us reasserts itself if we can be prevented from taking the final, irrevocable step and are pulled back abruptly to the real world. And we are again prepared to cling to life with renewed tenacity. But most of that you must already know. The information is included in your training."

The young man agreed that this was so.

"You must realize, then, that ninety-nine percent of your calls are merely attempted suicides. Your intervention allows them the catharsis of decision and ensures their gratitude—but what about that other one per cent?"

The young man thought for a moment. "They are, by definition, insane," he replied. "Their desire to take their own lives is not so much a product of depression but of a mind which has reasoned itself out of existence."

"Quite so," Darius agreed. He waved the little laser slowly back and forth, always keeping it directed in the general direction of the Follower. "And tell me, what are the symptoms of this sort of mind? I mean, how are they registered on that little meter you have there?"

The young man licked suddenly dry lips. "By—by an unnaturally high elation." His eyes remained fixed on the dial in front of him. He looked suddenly afraid.

DARIUS leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk. The barrel of the gun now pointed unwaveringly at the young man.

"If you're so keen to kill yourself," the Follower said, "why not simply cancel your premium? Then you could take your life without fear of intervention."

He was talking for time and Darius knew it.

"But to do so would spoil the game," he said.

"Game? What game?"

"The game of so-called immortality. To cancel my policy would ensure that the next time my intellectual despair got the better of me there would be nobody around to stop me when I opted for oblivion. And that would be dreadful. You see, this animal we have inside us is old and wise and every bit as determined to endure as our fiendish intellect is to dispose of us—and in most cases it will have its way."

"It's all a farce," the young man blustered. "You know you'll never succeed. You just play out this little game to assuage your ego."

"No, that's not correct. You see, there's always the chance—small, I must admit—that our Follower won't be on hand at the exact second that he's needed. Or that the observation circuits will malfunction—or something equally stimulating will occur. Those have happened occasionally—haven't they?"

The young man looked uncomfortable. "I believe so. Once or twice, perhaps—no more."

"No more? But no matter. Even those few instances are sufficient to bring an element of chance into the situation. I'll admit that the odds are astronomically in your favor—but that little uncertainty remains and gives spice to the game. It introduces the fascinat-

ing concept that one's death does ultimately rest in the arms of blind chance—a prospect that fascinates the intellect as much as it repels the animal part of the mind."

An expression of pain passed briefly across the face of the immortal. "Oh, I really *am* sorry. I shouldn't be talking like this to one as young as yourself. To you the universe must seem a marvelous place and life itself a constant source of pleasure."

The young man's troubled face denied this.

"How terribly thoughtless of me to introduce this dark philosophy in to your aspiring young mind. But let me caution you, my lad—do not covet longevity. It is a boon with barbs in its tail and these will dig down into your heart and tear out your hope, your dreams and your confidence. The ancients were right—three score years and ten is time enough to consider the mocking ghost of time; more than that is a burden which a man cannot bear, because he was made to be mortal. We mock the gods when we outlive our allotted span—and their wrath is devious."

The young man had inched slowly back towards the glowing portal behind him while Darius talked.

"Don't do that, please," the immortal directed. "If you take one more step I will kill you where you stand."

The Follower froze to the carpet, stunned.

Darius tightened his finger across the firing stud of the handweapon. His hand was steady and the expression on his face was determined. "Do I frighten you? Did you ever consider this, that I might take *your* life?" He smiled crookedly. "The circuits in these walls wouldn't stop me if I did. After all, they are only programed to prevent me from taking my own life, not from taking someone else's."

With a great effort the young man pulled himself together. "I think you'd better put that down, sir. You need help. I'll call a therapist and—"

"No you won't."

"But, sir—you need help! You need care and attention and—"

"I need nothing of the sort," Darius interrupted. "Tell me, young man, is there any way you could prevent me taking *your* life, if I wished?"

His Follower said nothing. But Darius noted with satisfaction that his right hand had strayed to the wide steel belt around his waist and was hovering nervously over one of the bright switches.

"I know for a fact," Darius pointed out, "that you can generate a fairly effective force field from that belt of yours—adequate enough to repel the more commonplace energies of our Technology but hardly likely to dis-

place the concentrated output of a finely tuned laser—"

The young man's face telegraphed a look of pure terror. His right hand twitched and snapped down against the switch on his belt in a desperate gamble.

An expression of wild exultance leaped into Darius Wynter's eyes and he pressed the firing stud on the beautiful handgun with intense satisfaction.

He had surreptitiously adjusted the small dial on the bridge of the weapon while he talked. A wide beam of energy reached out for the terrified Follower. His protective screen went up a fraction of a second before the ravenous force leaped at him—a fact the immortal had insured by calculating his firing delay to the exact fraction of a second—and the charge ricocheted away from the feeble—but, in this case, effective enough—shield.

The widely beamed energy bounced back from the protected figure and raced toward the wide window looking out over the timeless sea.

Darius Wynter caught the full force of the charge calmly. His desk was engulfed and incinerated in an instant and the life was torn from his weary body and blasted out through a great rent in the window.

WHEN the smoke cleared the stunned and frightened Follower saw the burned and disfigured body of his client poised in an incongruous attitude. The protective circuits had whirled into action much too late to save the life of Darius Wynter but they had thrown this dreadful husk into stasis and kept it in position, sitting in the charred ruin of a chair that would have collapsed under his living weight, and surrounded by the still smoldering ashes of his desk.

The young man stood in a state of shock for some time. He was overcome by a terrible sense of failure that was somehow related to something more personal than the mere loss of a client. Eventually he shook himself out of this state and walked over to survey the mocking corpse.

Its dreadful charred face looked back at him. A cold wind howled in the space where the window had been, but was powerless to move the lightest ash in the room.

The young man shuddered. And then he kneeled for the second time to activate a switch on the small black box he had left on the floor.

The room shimmered and dissolved as the stasis effect was canceled out. The grotesque figure of the dead man collapsed slowly into a soft pile of ashes on the charred floor, where the mournful sea wind stirred it gently and rolled away the mocking smile of triumph. ●

THE MAN WHO DEVOURED BOOKS

He fattened on knowledge—until consumed by a greater wisdom!

"WE CAN give you knowledge," said the salesman-thing.

Claude Mabry looked all around his room: mildewed wallpaper, broken linoleum, dirty long underwear slung over a chair that had a weak leg, the clock face that had been cracked and repaired so many times with scotch tape that he could hardly see it said 3:20.

"I'm smart enough for me," he said. "There's such a thing as being too smart for your own good."

"That't right," said the salesman-thing, "and there's such a thing as being so smart you have to wash dishes down at Stan's Chili Bowl to earn enough to live—here."

Claude could not reply. The whole thing reminded him of the Bible: a snake or whatever it was dressed up like a man, offering "knowledge"—it just didn't make sense.

"Look, I don't mean to be unpleasant," said the salesman. "But we Guzz are a hell of a lot more powerful and a hell of a lot smarter than your species. If we'd wanted to, we could have vaporized your whole planet—but it's not our way. So when somebody comes offering to make you smart, don't knock it."

Claude wanted to rip off that grinning, false mansuit and see what the Guzz looked like. He half-rose, then sank back again and looked at the floor.

"If you're so good, why do you want to do anything for me?"

"I don't want to do anything for you. I voted to turn Earth into a bird refuge. But we have a democratic form of government and the majority wanted to make your kind fit citizens to share the universe with us."

"All right, how do I know you can make me smart?"

The salesman opened his briefcase and took out a handful of bright brochures. "Don't take my word for it that we can make you one of the smartest men on Earth," he said. "Don't take it from me that being smart is worthwhile. Millions are trying our plan. Thousands have tried it already. Have a look."

He handed Claude a folder showing full-color pictures of quiet scholars, white-coated scientists, dignified judges and beaming businessmen. Their testimonials were capped with red headlines:

COULDN'T READ OWN NAME—
NOW COMMANDS 20 LANGUAGES!

FAMOUS ECONOMIST
"HATED ARITHMETIC"

"DUMB OX"
TO BRILLIANT THEOLOGIAN—IN 7 MONTHS!

"But—what would I study?"

"Everything" The salesman pro-

duced another slick booklet and began turning the pages, showing Claude pictures of happy housewives and hairy-handed laborers reading heavy volumes, farmers peering through microscopes and grannies using slide rules. "We call our system the Interface Way. Every person we accept must study at least two subjects intensively. If the subjects are unrelated, all the better. We mix mathematics with literature, we throw theoretical physics at a medical specialist, we give the mathematician theology."

"What would I get?"

"If we accepted you, you'd be tested. Then we'd know."

"What do you mean, if?" Claude felt he had just been offered a million-dollars, but at the word "if" it had shrunk to about a nickle

The stranger, sensing his anxiety, spoke soothingly. "Don't worry too much about that. We won't be testing your I.Q. or previous knowledge. In fact, the less of either, the better. We want people who haven't had a chance, people who feel useless because the sleeping genius within them has never been awakened. What do you say?"

"I don't know. What would it cost me?"

"All the money in the world couldn't buy you a better education pal. But all it costs is your signature."

"Well—oh, hell, why not?"

"Why not?" echoed the salesman, handing him a pen. Claude signed a few forms in various colors and the salesman gave him a copy of each.

"Claude," he said, "you've just made your first intelligent decision."

THE Guzz had pretty well taken over Earth, in every way. Guzz-developed gadgets were in every home. Clergymen thanked the Lord from their pulpits that the Guzz were not warlike or vicious but a truly democratic—ah—people. The government made daily announcements of new Guzz gifts to humanity.

They quietly disarmed the nuclear powers, they made efficient clean-air and sewage-disposal systems for our cities, they introduced new food sources and birth-control plans in Asia. Hardly a government bureau in the world had not been approached by the Guzz with a suggestion or a gift—and these aliens used no stronger forces than tact and kindly persuasion.

The only disagreeable thing about them was the way they looked—both at home and in Earth-drag.

On their own planet (or so it was said, for no one had yet visited them) the Guzz were disagreeably vermiform. Here, so as not to spook the natives, they wore human forms of plastic.

Their movements in these were natural enough, but they all looked alike. As far as most people, including Claude, were concerned, the Guzz were just so many talking store-window dummies.

THE first box that arrived was a table-top computer equipped with keyboard, microphone, speaker and visual display screen. That night when he returned from Stan's Chili Bowl, Claude lay awake looking at all that gleaming, complicated junk and wondering if he might have made a mistake in even hoping. . .

Next day three packages arrived. The first contained books and a sheaf of documents: a certification that Claude Mabry was eligible for this correspondence course, more copies of the various forms he'd signed—and a booklet entitled: *Welcome, Future Genius!*

> The government of Guzz and your own government wish to take this opportunity to welcome you. . . conditions and by-laws. . . You may not always see the reasons for instructions given you in this course, but they are necessary to ensure efficient use of your time.
>
> The enclosed books are for Lesson One. The books required for each lesson will be provided with the lesson. At various points in the program you will be asked to study them thoroughly.

Claude glanced at the titles of the books: *The Interpretation of Dreams,* Sigmund Freud; *Verbal Behavior*, B.F. Skinner; *Towards Information Retrieval*, Fairthorne; were only a few.

The dream book looked interesting but inside, like all the others, it was full of long-winded sentences that didn't mean anything.

The second package contained a tape cassette titled: *Program for Lesson One* and simple instructions for loading it into the teaching computer.

As soon as Claude could do so, he switched on the machine. He might have expected it to give him a problem, to register the fact that it was turned on, or at least to ask his name, but it did none of these things.

Instead, it politely requested him to eat a sandwich.

Claude scratched his head. The Guzz had to be joking. He could imagine them watching him right now, laughing at his stupidity. So this was the big learning course! So this...

He remembered the third package and tore it open. Inside was a cellophane-wrapped sandwich. Though Claude turned it over and over, he could see only one difference between this and any other cellophane-wrapped sandwich: Inside the wrapper was a

plain printed name slip. But instead of "ham and cheese" or "peanut butter and grape jelly" it simply read: Eat me.

The bread was a little stale but he enjoyed the salami or para-salami inside.

An hour later he correctly answered a request to explain how and why dreams were subject to syntactical rules. The answer was obvious.

Two hours later he had read Ayer's *The Problem of Knowledge,* read it at skimming speed because it was already perfectly familiar to him.

A lesson or two later Claude had gone through about fifty difficult books without any trouble. He progressed rapidly through the programs, though it did not seem like progress at all: he simply knew what he was doing. Using Fourier analysis to solve problems in electronics seemed something he had always known, just as he had always realized the gross truth of Newtonian mechanics and the finer truth of quantum mechanics, the position of Hubert Van Eyck in Flemish painting, the syllogistic properties of an Andrew Marvell poem, the flaws in the historical theories of Spengler and Toynbee —or for that matter, how to prepare *sauce ozéne* with seven ingredients. Scraps of learning, areas of learning, even whole complex structures of learning were suddenly his.

Having learned, he worked. By the fourth lesson Claude had gone through Gödel's proof of the necessary incompletness of mathematical theorems and picked holes in Lucas's application of this to mechanical devices. He had also put forth an aesthetic theory understandable by perhaps ten men, refutable by no more than one. He had nearly destroyed mathematical economics, and devised a tentative translating machine. He was hardly aware that these things had not been done before, nor was he really aware of the transition from his job at the Chili Bowl to a research fellowship at a prominent university.

THE transition came about from his publication of various monographs in journals, the names of which he knew only from footnotes in the books he was skimming. Some of the monographs came back. He had sent them to wrong addresses, or to journals long out of print.

Others, like his "Queueing Theory Applied to Neural Activity" and "On Poetic Diction," became classics. Men with tweedy manners but sharp suits and clean attaché cases came to see him. They sat in the steamy, oily kitchen of Stan's Chili Bowl and talked with him about quasar explanations, new codes of international law and logic mechanisms. True, many prodi-

gies were springing up now that the Guzz offered their massive home study program. But for the time being, genius was still something universities fought over. And so, almost without knowing it (he was thinking of other things), Claude Mabry gave Stan his notice, packed his T-shirts and blue jeans and entrained for Attica University.

He remembered only isolated facts about this trip: sending a change-of-address card to the Guzz; losing his ticket; not bringing enough pager (and so alighting from the train at Attica, where University officials were waiting to greet him, his hands so full of slips of toilet paper on which were penciled notes toward a theory of history that he could not accept the handshakes of these venerables). Without comment he settled into his new life and went on working.

From time to time he wondered what was in the sandwich that came with each lesson. A wonder drug that unlocked hidden knowledge that lay "sleeping" within him? An intelligence accelerator? Whatever it was, it was essential to the process. The only time he'd tried studying without it, Claude had floundered among symbols that *almost* made sense.

He wondered, too, about the Guzz. The little he learned about their planet and culture (in the final lesson) whetted his appetite for more. He longed to know everything about them, almost to become one of them: They alone would understand what he was doing. It was becoming clear that his colleagues at the university considered him some kind of freak—he would not wear a suit, he could not converse about departmental politics and he was inhumanly intelligent.

Claude ordered all the information on the Guzz he could get. This proved to be a slim volume by a second-rate anthropologist who had interviewed a few of the aliens. Claude skimmed it and began a treatise of his own.

"Despite the advanced 'democracy' of the Guzz," he wrote, "they retain a few oddly 'primitive,' even sacramental habits."

There was a knock at the door. The standard face of a Guzz looked around the frame, saw that he was alone and walked its standard body into the office. Without saying anything, it came over and struck him on the forehead. Twitching, Claude slipped to the floor. The visitor busied itself with a set of plastic bags.

The fallen man was muttering. Bending lower, the man-shape heard: "...planarian worms? DNA or...?"

"Right you are!" boomed the Guzz. "Yes, we *are* analogous to your planarian worms—so, of course, are you—and we can transmit behavior genetically."

He fished a long knife from one

bag and tested its blade against a false thumb. "Of course our genes need help. Obviously our—I mean to include your—children do not learn much from their parents' genes. But these same genes, properly assimilated—"

"I knew it!" Claude croaked, getting up on one elbow. The blow had stunned him, but still the machinery of his mind ground on. With an estatic expression he said, "The old taboos against eating the king, eating the old man, the sage, the father yes?"

"Check." With a hearty chuckle the visitor kneeled by Claude's side and felt for the carotid artery. "Those ridiculous taboos have kept your species back hundreds of thousands of years. We're just now making up the lost time for you."

"The sandwich meat—"

"Housewives, mechanics, professional people—all the people in that brochure you saw. Just think of it!" He waved the knife oratorically, and the plastic face turned up, as if gazing at a vista. "One genius provides three thousand sandwiches, each capable of providing—with no wastage—part of the education for one more genius! Thus learning will transform your whole species—you will become as gods!"

The Guzz returned his attention to the matter at hand. He poised the knife.

"Superman," murmured the genius. "On white or rye." •

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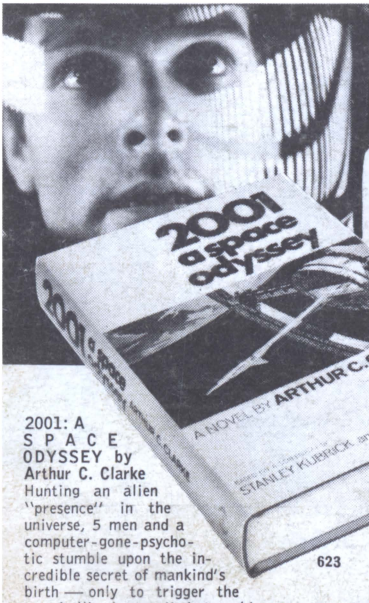

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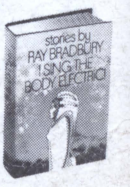

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